

No 42

5 CENTS.

WIDE AWAKE

A COMPLETE
STORY

WEEKLY.

EVERY
WEEK.

YOUNG WIDE AWAKE'S BIGGEST BLAZE; OR, SAVING A BURNING CITY.

By ROBERT LENNOX.



"Lively, now! Don't make any flukes, either!" shouted Young Wide Awake. "A blazing city's homes are at stake!" Right gallantly the Belmont boys rolled down good old Washington 1.

"It's a scramble for a fireman's record!" cheered Young Wide Awake. "Come on!"

WIDE AWAKE WEEKLY

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Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1907, in the office of the Librarian of Congress, Washington, D. C., by Frank Tousey, Publisher, 24 Union Square, New York.

No. 42.

NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 1, 1907.

PRICE 5 CENTS.

Young Wide Awake's Biggest Blaze

OR,

SAVING A BURNING CITY

By ROBERT LENNOX

CHAPTER I.

THE SORE-HEAD HAS A TALE OF WOE.

Belmont had every reason to be proud of the latest, newest half of its volunteer fire department.

This consisted of a juvenile fire company, running with hand engine and hose-cart, composed of boys from fifteen to eighteen.

Just one boy—Ted Lester—one of the liveliest of them all, was only fourteen.

He had been let into the company on account of his especial fitness for fire duty.

In especial Ted was a tireless climber up into high places. Aloft, he knew not the meaning of dizziness.

At the head of Washington No. 1, as the company was known, was Dick Halstead, one of the most daring young firemen who ever lived.

Owing to his always being alert, often scenting duty even before the call came, he was known as Young Wide Awake.

Cool, quiet and thoughtful, Hal Norton, Young Wide Awake's friend, served as lieutenant.

Joe Darrell, hot-headed, and sprinter and boxer of local repute, was foreman of the engine crew.

Terry Rourke, he of the "sun-kissed" hair that was almost red, a talkative, lively, gallant youngster, and a fighter, if pushed a bit, was foreman of the hose-cart crew. He was Young Wide Awake's closest chum.

In all, the company, Washington No. 1, was made up of

twenty-eight boys—or, as Terry sometimes put it, with a roguish twinkle in his eyes, "twenty-six boys and wan pig."

For Sam Bangs, a big, heavy fellow, more often known, on account of his awkwardness, as "Slam Bang," was given to eating most of the time that he wasn't asleep, in school or fighting fire.

In the first week of its organization the junior fire company, under Young Wide Awake's leadership, had signally distinguished itself at flame-subduing and life-saving.

One boy there was who had joined the company, and then had resigned on the evening of the election of officers.

This member of a day was Fred Parsons.

Because his father was president of the First National Bank, and also had a monopoly of the local fire insurance business, and had helped in the forming of the junior company, Fred had confidently expected to be elected captain of the Washingtons.

Defeated, and enraged, Parsons had then tried for the post of lieutenant.

In short, Fred Parsons was not favored for a single one of the four offices within the gift of the company.

Defeated, ashamed and angry, Fred had promptly and stormily resigned.

Ever since that moment Parsons had seized every chance to sneer at and belittle the Washingtons as "a crew of hoodlums."

In especial was his wrath directed at Young Wide Awake. There was another reason besides the election in the

company that had turned Parsons against our hero, and that was the fact that Dick, through rescuing Kitty Lester at the grave risk of his own life from a blazing building, had thereby made her acquaintance.

Kitty was the coquettish, but sweet, staunch and loyal daughter of old John Lester, one of Belmont's richest men, who lived on the outskirts of the town on a fine old estate.

Fred had always regarded himself as Kitty's beau.

In fact, Kitty herself had not been indisposed toward Parsons, who was a good-looking young fellow, and who knew how to make himself decidedly disagreeable when occasion demanded.

But Young Wide Awake, of course, made Kitty's acquaintance and secured her interest after his splendid, gallant conduct in rescuing her.

Fred Parsons had not been thrown over by Miss Kitty, but some of his sneers at Young Wide Awake, whose widowed mother conducted a typewriting office in the town, had incurred her displeasure.

Thereupon Miss Kitty had given Fred to understand that Young Wide Awake was to be reckoned as one of her friends, and that he must not be belittled in her presence.

So the feeling of Parsons against our hero had grown apace.

As for our hero, he had thrashed Parsons once for an insult, and after that had been prepared to let the matter drop.

The day on which this story opens was a Saturday.

Six of the boys in the company were employed in local factories and four more as clerks in stores.

The other eighteen, attending the grammar or the High School, had a holiday now.

Some dozen or so of them were down at Washington's fire house, on quiet little Holmes Street, off Main Street.

"There! I guess you can let up on cleaning the good old engine now," declared Young Wide Awake; and the dozen firemen who had been at work with cleaning-rags and chamois-skin ceased from their labors.

It was early yet—not half-past eight, in fact; but Belmont people started the day early.

"She looks so dod-gasted nice," growled Sam Bangs, as he looked the hand engine over, "that it would be a pity to take the old tub out to a fire and get her all mussed up."

"Most toime to eat, ain't it, Slam?" quizzed Terry Rourke, who sat with one leg thrown over a shining hub of the hose-cart.

"I didn't have much breakfast this morning," sighed Slam Bang, regretfully.

"Not more'n a hogshead full av grub, eh?" tormented Terry.

"I guess I didn't," blurted Sam, indignantly. "Let me see: Two apples, two plates of mush, some steak, four eggs, a few little pieces of bacon, three or four baked potatoes, only six hot biscuits, five cups of coffee——"

"Was ye layin' in enough for the week?" inquired Terry, innocently.

"For a week?" repeated Slam, with such a puzzled look that the other fellows began to roar.

"Did anny av ye iver see Slam eat a meal?" demanded the merciless Terry. "Did ye iver see a hog get both av his feet in th' trough and just swaller, swaller, swaller? That's Slam!"

Sam Bangs colored up, but did not get really angry.

In the first place, it required a good deal of effort to get angry, and in the next place, this always hungry boy was used to being guyed about his appetite.

"I'm not hoping for a fire," observed Young Wide Awake; "but if one should happen on us we're ready."

"Where's Joe?" asked Hal.

No one knew. Joe, though foreman of the engine crew, had not yet put in an appearance.

As it happened, the hottest-headed member of the fire company was at that moment standing in front of the post-office, at the curb, both hands thrust into pockets.

He was gazing, with a look of amusement, after the retreating figure of a slim, tall, fashionably dressed young man.

This young man's face was almost pretty enough for a girl, but his face was not strong enough for a man's.

He was Clarence Putney, son of one of the wealthy old families of Lincoln, a hustling little city some twenty miles to the eastward by rail.

Clarence was a friend of Fred Parsons. The boys had once been together at a boarding-school.

Clarence was now over in Belmont on a short visit to Parsons.

In the moment after he walked indignantly away from Joe, Clarence reached Fred Parsons, who was stepping around the nearest corner.

"Well, of all the rude fellows, this town has the pick and choice!" declared Clarence, in his high, shrill voice.

"What's the matter?" smiled Fred, as the pair halted.

"Who's that young fellow standing down there at the curb?" demanded Putney.

"He? Oh, that's Joe Darrell," grunted Parsons.

"Who and what is he?"

"Oh, he goes to High School, and serves in that fire company of hoodlums that I told you about."

"Hoodlums!" ejaculated Clarence, disgustedly. "I should say so!"

"Why, what's wrong, Clarence?"

"Why, I was standing in front of the post-office when I heard somebody saying something about Young Wide Awake and the Washingtons," complained Putney, his voice almost trembling. "That rude young fellow was standing there, too. I asked if the Washingtons were the hoodlum company in the fire department."

"That must have made him hot," grinned Fred. "What did he say?"

"Why, the saucy little rascal said that the Washingtons had had a hoodlum in the company, but that the only hoodlum resigned on the night the company first got started."

"I'd like to punch his head," gritted Fred, reddening.

"Do you suppose he meant you?"

"He must have. I was the only one who resigned. But what happened next, Clarence?"

"Why, I didn't know that that impudent young rascal belonged to the fire department, so I said that, from all I could hear, the boys in Washington One would be better off in the reform school than in a fire department."

"Good! good!" glowed Parsons. "What did Joe Darrell say to that?"

"Say!" gasped Clarence. What did he say! Well, it wasn't so much what he said as it was the queer way Darrell looked me over when he answered me."

"What was the answer?" insisted Fred Parsons.

"Why—why," stammered Clarence, growing redder and his voice becoming huskier, "that Joe Darrell looked me all over, and then he said: 'My, my, my! You don't look intelligent enough to have an opinion!' Did you ever hear anything so rude as that for a young hoodlum to say to me?" demanded Clarence, his cheeks reddening more than ever.

"That's just like one of those fresh fellows of Young Wide Awake's gang that he calls a fire company," uttered Parsons. "But, say, Clarence, what did you do when Darrell hinted that you weren't intelligent enough to have an opinion?"

"I walked away from the rude fellow," sputtered Clarence.

"Didn't you do something else first?"

"Do—something else?" asked Clarence, looking puzzled.

"Didn't you hit the young rowdy for his impudence?"

"Hit him?"

"Of course!"

"Do you think I ought to have done that?" asked Clarence, slowly.

He was some inches taller than Joe Darrell.

"It's what I should do, if a fellow gave me any lip," retorted Parsons.

"Wouldn't I demean myself by having anything to do with such a rude fellow?" asked Clarence, anxiously.

"My boy, it's a sure thing that you'll get guyed from one end of Belmont to the other if this story gets out and you haven't thrashed the fellow that gave you such a face-full."

As they both turned at this instant to look at Joe that youth saw them and laughed.

"Why, I believe the little beast is laughing at us!" uttered Clarence, uneasily.

"Let's go down there and ask him. You ask him, Clarence, and if he gets gay with you soak him one. Do you understand that sort of thing?"

"I think I do," replied Clarence, uneasily.

He didn't want to go, but he was still more afraid of being held in contempt by Fred Parsons.

"I'll go right down—if you'll come with me," proposed Putney.

"Steer ahead, then. I'm with you," urged Parsons.

"But, mind you, I'm not going to do the talking. This is your affair, Putney."

Not ever having had an affair of this kind on his hands, Putney did not know quite how to act.

He drew himself up very erect and tried to look most dignified as he approached Joe, who was wholly unprepared for such trouble as was bearing down his way.

"See here, fellow!" began Clarence, haughtily, as he came up, Fred just behind him.

"Darrell is my name," said Joe, quietly.

Fellow——"

"Darrell—Mr. Darrell!"

"Fellow——"

But Joe turned impatiently away, looking, instead, at Parsons.

"Hasn't it any manners?" inquired Joe, jerking a thumb over his shoulder at the astounded Mr. Putney.

"Fellow!" began Putney again, his haughtiness badly damaged by this time.

"Well, what do you want—fellow?" Joe asked crisply.

"You are unbearably rude!" cried Clarence.

"Run away and play, then, where you won't hear me," smiled Joe.

"Fellow, I——"

"Does your mother allow you to play with rude boys?" mimicked Joe.

Even Clarence Putney could understand that he was being guyed, and that he was getting the worst of it.

Just like a flash Clarence reached out, aiming a blow with the back of his hand at Joe's mouth.

But Joe brushed the hand aside, commanding:

"Quit your fooling."

"Wh—what do you mean, fellow?" quivered Clarence.

"I mean that I'll dump you in that ash-can over there if you keep on trying to annoy me," retorted Joe, mimicking the dude's manner.

Then it was that Mr. Clarence Putney flung all caution to the winds.

Becoming thoroughly enraged, he sailed in.

CHAPTER II.

"THE ALARM FROM BOX-ON-THE-EAR."

In utter recklessness Clarence closed his fist and struck out straight for Joe's face.

But Darrell, practiced boxer that he was, took one short step aside, put up his open hand and brushed the dude's fist aside.

"What do you mean by acting like that, you rude fellow?" demanded Clarence, drawing back and growing red again. "Are you afraid to fight?"

"Oh!" said Joe, wonderingly. "Were you trying to fight? Was that it?"

Parsons, hating all the Young Wide Awake crew, managed to keep a straight face.

Not so with a few men and boys who had halted near to see what was going on and what was going to happen.

"I never saw such an insolent fellow as you are," cried Clarence, angrily. "You're a regular puppy—puppy!"

"Bow, wow, wow!" said Joe, obligingly. "Fred, why don't you take this kid home, before it gets into a temper?"

At that Clarence rushed in again to the attack.

But this time he so far forgot the rules of fair play as to try to kick Darrell on the shins.

That was a little too much for one with Joe's limited stock of patience.

Dodging the kick as nimbly as could be, he let his own right hand, open, fly out.

His open palm went whack! against one of Clarence's shell-like ears.

It was a stinger, a staggerer, though it broke no bones.

But Clarence, caught on one foot at the time the slap landed, toppled and fell rather heavily to the sidewalk, the tears coming to his eyes.

Hardly knowing what he was saying in his rage, shame and astonishment, Clarence sobbed out:

"Fire!"

"Yes," grimaced Joe, quietly, "I just heard the alarm from box-on-the-ear!"

"Oh, I'll make you pay for this," protested Clarence, as Fred Parsons, with a face that was red and white by turns, stepped forward and dragged the dude up to his feet.

Without looking either at Joe or at the growing, grinning crowd, Putney turned and walked up the street.

"Parsons," said Joe, generously, and holding out his hand, "I forgive you."

"Forgive me?" asked Fred, as he took the proffered hand in surprise. "For what?"

"You didn't know what a bum show you were putting up—I'm sure you didn't," Joe assured him, pleasantly. "But get that thing home in a hurry, before something hasty runs over it."

Joe thrust his hands down in his pockets again as Fred Parsons moved swiftly after his retreating, shame-faced chum.

Out of the crowd came Young Wide Awake, looking at the captain of his engine crew very curiously.

"Fighting again, Joe, old fellow?" asked our hero, half-reproachfully.

"Oh, it would be a shame to call that fighting," grinned Joe. "It really would. But what are the fellows going to do down at the fire house this morning?"

"Do?" echoed Young Wide Awake. "They've done it."

"Cleaned the machines?"

"Until they shine like gold and silver!"

"Thunder!" muttered Joe, disgustedly. "I didn't want to shirk, but I didn't think the fellows would be around so soon. Well, then, I'm going down to the fire house to see if there ain't some job I can find to do that'll make up for my not being there earlier."

Young Wide Awake, who was on his way to his mother's office, nodded and kept on his way.

In the meantime, Fred Parsons, feeling utterly humiliated by the poor showing made by his friend, and finding that Clarence was still sobbing, drew that unhappy dude into a cigar store, and from there into a back room.

"Get through bawling, and then wash your face," he commanded, disgustedly. "I didn't believe you were quite such a baby, Clarence."

"Baby!" cried the dude, indignantly. "Wouldn't you get mad if you'd been treated like that—and right on the street, before everybody?"

Fred snorted and shrugged his shoulders.

Suddenly, as he sat cowering in the arm-chair into which Parsons had thrust him, Clarence pricked up his ears.

A heavy-set young fellow, with one of the toughest faces ever seen outside of State prison, was talking to the proprietor of the cigar store in the outer room.

He was describing a run-in he had had with some one.

"And say," went on this tough young man, "you know me, don't you? Dat's right! Dere ain't any guy can git gay wid me feelings, is dere? What? So, when de mug jollied me about de petticoats dat was me company, I just——"

Here followed the details of what was claimed to be a very lively fist-fight, with the winnings all on the side of the fellow who was now telling the story in the outer room of the store.

Clarence sat up and began to take notice.

Then he went to the door, taking a sly peep at the talker.

That talker was Bill Stikes, a big, hulking fellow, yet quick as a cat and tough as a hickory nut.

He was a great, good-natured fellow, who, when he fought, fought more for the sheer joy of fighting than for any other reason.

Not a bit of a bully was Bill.

Everybody in Belmont knew that.

When Bill fought, he wanted a fair match to fight with, and he wanted the other man to get as much fun out of fighting as he did.

As Clarence drew back and listened, a new, queer look came into his eyes.

"He must be a terrific fighter," whispered Clarence to Fred.

"Who—Bill Stikes?" rejoined Parsons. "Yes, he's a quick and hard hitter. About as good as there is in this part of the State, I guess."

"I'd like to talk with him," whispered Clarence, eagerly. "Do you think he'd mind?"

"Oh, Bill!" hailed Parsons. "Trot in here. Friend of mine wants to meet you."

Bill came in, his big, red face agape with curiosity, for, usually, Fred Parsons was not so friendly with him.

Fred introduced Clarence, whose hand Bill gripped as if he were trying to cripple it.

"My, but you look like a powerful fighter!" cried Clarence, delightedly.

"Oh, I size up some in de infant class—see?" grinned Bill. "What's de game, gents?"

"There's a fellow I want you to try your fighting powers on," proposed Clarence.

"Reg'lar pug, or some unknown geezer what t'inks he can put up his hands good?" queried Bill, with a professional air.

"Do you know a fellow named Joe Darrell?" asked Clarence.

"Who? Him? Little Joe? A handy lad he is, and full of grit as an orange is full of juice—see? But Joe an' me's about ten years apart in age—see? Joe's a good one, but he ain't got de size or de musk-lar show-down to get at me yet. It'd be a shame to get in de ring and take de people's money on a scrap like dat—see?"

"Oh, I don't want a prize-fight," Clarence made haste to assure him.

"Say, I t'ought maybe ye was makin' a break into a ring wid money to burn on yer judgment," Bill assured the dude. "I jest wanted to put ye wise, so you wouldn't lose your whole roll backing a bantam-weight against a middle-weight—see? I ain't no robber, and I don't want no fake gate money—see? Now, if ye know some one what's in my class——"

"I'm not trying to arrange any sort of a prize-fight," cried Clarence, almost angrily. "What I want you to do is to find Joe Darrell, grab him and give him an awful pounding. Do you understand that? And I'll pay you well for your trouble, Mr. Stikes. Now, what do you say?"

"Say, it 'pears to me like ye're tryin' t' stack me up against de kid to do him up," remarked Mr. Stikes, in a doubtful voice.

"That's it—that's just it," cried Clarence, eagerly; and reaching after his pocketbook he took out a twenty-dollar bill and laid it across the palm of Bill Stikes.

Bill looked at the money much as if he wondered whether it was real money.

Even five dollars was a large sum for Bill to have.

When Putney laid a second twenty across the first one Bill gasped.

"Say, keep 'em a-coming," he begged. "I need de money for de orphan asylum."

Clarence laid a third twenty in Bill's palm.

"That ain't all, is it, boss?" queried Mr. Stikes, regretfully.

"How much do you want for giving Joe Darrell such a beating that he won't be able to stand up for a week?" asked Clarence.

"How much ye willin' t' give?" asked Bill, whose head was being turned by the sight of such easy wealth.

Clarence produced another twenty-dollar bill.

"That all?" urged Stikes.

"Lend me some, will you?" appealed Putney, turning over to his friend.

Though Fred Parsons was beginning to feel a huge disgust of the whole affair, he passed over his pocketbook, and, turning, then walked out into the outer store.

"Will twenty more be enough?" asked Clarence. "That will make an even hundred."

"Sure!" grinned Bill. "I won't never have to work no more—see? Me pile's made!"

"And if you should get arrested," hinted Clarence.

"Pinched, ye mean?"

"If you should have any trouble with the police or the courts, I'll see you through the scrape," Clarence promised.

"When d'ye want de job done?" demanded Bill, straightening up as he thrust the money down into a trousers pocket—the whole hundred that he was to receive for thumping Joe.

"The sooner the better."

"Widin ten minutes, den," promised Bill, "if I kin find dat Joe. Wanter come along an' see de mix-up?"

"N-n-no," hesitated young Putney. "But I'll wait here, if you'll come right back and tell me all about it."

"As soon as de spankin' match is over," promised Bill, lurching toward the door.

"Spanking!" squeaked Clarence, excitedly. "I'm not paying for a spanking. I want this to be a—a—a slug-ging!"

"Dat's what de kid'll get," promised Bill, as he rolled out of the store.

"Now, what do you think of that?" whispered Clarence Putney, his small, mean soul exulting in the thought of the punishment that lay before Joe Darrell.

"Not a heap," retorted Fred Parsons, crisply. "I've got a better liking for fellows that can do their own fighting."

"I'm too much of a gentleman for that," retorted Clarence, with dignity.

Fred snorted, but made no further reply.

Before Bill Stikes had gone a block down Main Street he began to feel ashamed of his bargain.

Tough as he was, tempted as he was by the thought of so much money, Bill, at bottom, was about ninety pounds man to the hundred pounds of flesh.

Twice he stopped as if bent on turning around and going back to give up the shameful money.

"Good morning, Bill," came a pleasant greeting, as Young Wide Awake came out on the sidewalk from his mother's office.

Then Bill went all to the trembles with self-disgust.

"Say, Young Wider Wake," he muttered, samefacedly, "what kinder game d' youse t'ink I let a Lizzie-boy stake me for?"

"Eh?" asked our hero.

Then Bill blurted out with the whole story, winding up with:

"Say, Young Wider Wake, what do youse t'ink of dat? An' what d' youse t'inker me fer takin' de coin on a brace game like dat? What? Say?"

"I'm thinking," replied Young Wide Awake, slowly; and he was doing some hard thinking, during which time he looked at the roll of greenbacks that Bill regretfully displayed.

"Well, what's de t'ought dat's passing in yer mind?" insisted Bill.

"It seems to me," replied Young Wide Awake, with a sudden smile, "that it's a shame to let so much money go to waste, especially when the young fellow was so anxious to get rid of it. I'll tell you what, Bill. Walk down to the engine house with me and we'll talk it over with the crowd."

* * * * *

Something like half an hour later Bill Stikes returned to the cigar store.

Something must have happened in the meantime, for Bill had a left eye that looked as if it had been blacked with something hard.

There was blood—or what looked like it—dried on his nose, and more down his shirt-front.

He limped slightly, and his left fist was done up in a bandage.

"For heaven's sake, where have you been?" cried Fred Parsons, rising quickly. "Railroad wreck?"

"Who? Me?" asked Bill. "Nary! Nit! I've been t'rough dat mill dat youse staked me against. Say, he's a hot one, dat kid, Joe Darrell is! He's got hands like hot pipes! What?"

"You don't mean to say you've been fighting with Joe Darrell?" gasped Clarence, staring in amazement at the battered figure before him.

"Didn't youse stake me t' do dat very t'ing?" demanded Bill Stikes.

"You don't mean to say he licked you?" cried Clarence.

"Well, if he didn't," sighed Bill, "de kid sure acted mighty like he was goin' ter!"

"You—you—you——" gasped Putney.

"Yep, dat's right—what?" agreed Bill, solemnly. "I feel jest like dat—see?"

"And this is what I paid you all that money for?" shivered Clarence.

"Oh, de coin?" asked Bill. "Is dat it? Well, ye see, boss, Young Wider Wake, he acted as referee. Say, he was good t' me, Young Wider Wake was. He was gen'rous—all to de gen'rous. He called the battle a draw, and dat gave me half de coin—see?"

"Half the money!" gasped Clarence. "Half of what money?"

"Why, dat hundred youse put up for de purse," Bill explained.

"Half of that hundred?" demanded Clarence, his head whirling from all this bewilderment. "What on earth became of that other fifty dollars?"

"Oh, dat?" replied Bill. "Why, seein' as it was a draw, de other fifty went to Darrell. Joe, he was fightin' in de name of de engine company, so de money goes int' de treasury of de engine company. Dey're goin' t' use de coin t' buy a glad new banner for de comp'ny. Dat's right," Bill assured his hearers.

"This is all an infernal outrage!" cried Clarence, the tears all but coming to his eyes. "It's a swindle—a robbery!"

"We was wise t' de idea dat ye might t'ink dat," explained Bill, with becoming patience. "So I'll tell ye what we done. We put de whole hundred up with Young Wider Wake. If ye go right down an' ask for de coin at once, it's yours again—see? What? But if ye let de day go by wid-out askin' for it, den t-night I gets me half of de coin an' them fire boys buys a banner for de comp'ny wid deir half. Un'stand?"

Then, as if feeling that he had done his whole duty, Bill turned and walked out, leaving two dumbfounded, flabbergasted young men behind.

Fred Parsons was the first to recover the use of his voice.

"Now, you idiot!" he stormed. "You see what you've done."

"I've been played for a fool!" gasped Putney.

"Worse than that—you've dragged me in and made me the goat. You don't live here, and you can get away from this infernal mess. But I'll never hear the last of it. Life won't be worth living here in Belmont, for every one will know that I was mixed up in this with you. Oh, you idiot!"

"What shall I do?" wailed Clarence Putney, feebly.

"Get out as soon as you can—before you're caught and ridden around the town on a rail."

"They wouldn't do that, would they?" gasped Putney.

"There's no telling what some folks might do. Young Wide Awake has a good many friends here, and you've actually paid a fellow you supposed to be a thug to go and slug one of Young Wide Awake's fire boys. Putney, the safest, wisest and best thing you can do is to get out of town before a crowd of fellows come looking for you."

The dude took fright quickly enough.

Parsons, remembering that Clarence had been his guest, had the grace to walk with him as far as the depot.

Young Wide Awake, turning the corner of Holmes Street in company with Hal Norton, came upon the pair, almost face to face.

Both young firemen had all they could do to keep from laughing outright.

"Keep a stiff face, Hal," urged Young Wide Awake, in an undertone. "I've simply got to speak to Putney about his money."

Clarence drew back in some alarm when he saw the two young firemen coming toward him. But Parsons stiffened, scowling at our hero.

"Good morning; your name is Putney, I believe," began Young Wide Awake, briskly.

"Keep your beliefs to yourself," snapped Clarence, trying to look brave, though he was quaking inwardly.

But Young Wide Awake, keeping his patience, went on: "There has been some misunderstanding, I fear. Bill Stikes told us a story about how you put up some money for him to fight with Joe Darrel, of our company. At least, that was my information."

"Keep your information to yourself!" quavered Clarence.

"But it seems to me," went on Young Wide Awake, pro-

ducing a roll of money, "that there must be some mistake. Now, if you'll assure me that there was a mistake, and that this money really belongs to you——"

"Keep your suggestions to yourself!" shrieked Clarence, backing off.

"But what shall I do about this money?" Captain Dick Halstead asked.

"Keep it!" shrieked Clarence, starting almost at a run toward the railway station. "Keep your opinions, keep the money—keep your distance!"

And the dude was swiftly gone.

"Well, of all the queer games!" uttered our hero, glancing at his chum. "What do you make out of it all, Hal, old fellow?"

"All I can discover," replied Hal, slowly, thoughtfully, "is that we'll have to keep the money for lack of a claimant. It won't come in badly, either. But it's the queerest outcome of a joke I ever heard of. Twenty cents' worth of grease paint and red ink; rigging up Bill Stikes for a joke—and now Bill wins fifty and the fire company has a fifty for the fancy new banner it wanted. Whew!"

The news of the joke—or outrage, according to who was talking about it—spread as swiftly as such news is sure to.

Just before noon, Dick and Hal, strolling homeward, saw two pretty girls nodding at them from a passing carriage, which now turned in toward the curb.

"Miss Lester and Miss Vane," murmured Young Wide Awake, in pleased surprise.

Some time before the Vane mansion, in Ellis Street, had suffered from a fire, in which Kitty, visiting the Vanes, would have lost her life but for the gallant conduct of our hero.

Now, while their home was being rebuilt, the Vanes were stopping at the handsome home of the Lesters'.

Miss Kitty, to whom Fred Parsons had been showing marked attentions for more than a year, had since entertained a very high idea of our hero.

"Good morning, Captain Halstead," was Miss Kitty's quick, friendly greeting. "And good morning, Mr. Norton."

Both young men quickly returned the greetings of the girls.

"What's this amazing story that my madcap cousin, Ted, has been trying to tell me?" demanded Miss Lester.

"About what?" asked Dick.

"Oh, about some spectacular fight, I believe."

"That? Oh!"

Young Wide Awake exploded into a roar of laughter.

Then, as quickly as he could, he told of the joke played at the engine house; how Joe and Bill had pretended to fight, to the amusement of the onlooking fire boys, and then how Bill had been fixed up to send back to his employer.

"That's strange business for Fred Parsons to be in," uttered Kitty, disdainfully.

"But, Miss Lester," broke in Young Wide Awake, generously, "I don't believe Parsons had any active hand in it."

"Yet he was with that senseless idiot, Putney, wasn't he?" questioned Miss Kitty.

"Yes, I believe so. But, really, Miss Lester, I don't believe that it would be Parsons's way to be really mixed up in such a scheme. I don't blame Parsons a bit for it."

Though Young Wide Awake did not know it, his quick, generous way of absolving Parsons from blame in the matter greatly raised him in the opinion of this beautiful girl.

"How is Mr. Rourke?" asked Faith Vane of Hal.

For Terry Rourke, having helped Young Wide Awake to fight in defense of these two young ladies, already occupied a high place in Miss Vane's esteem.

"You are having a light time of it in the fire department, after that last great fire?" Kitty was saying to Dick.

"Yes; but we never know when——"

Clang!

It was the first note of a call sounding over the local electric fire signal service.

Clang! clang!

"That's our call!" shouted Dick, darting away.

CHAPTER III.

THE CALL FOR HELP.

"It's the engine-house call!" shouted Hal, as the two chums bolted, lifting their caps to the two girls as they ran.

From out of stores and around corners came other young fire boys of Belmont, all on a swift run for the engine house, down in Holmes Street.

Half a dozen of the fellows, Joe among them, had been at the engine house when the call came in.

Now, struggling into shirts or boots, they darted out to the sidewalk to meet their young captain as he came dashing to the spot.

Outside, in his buggy, sat black-whiskered Chief Pelton, of the Belmont Fire Department.

In one hand he held up a yellowish sheet of paper.

"Captain Halstead," he said crisply, as Young Wide Awake reached him, "I have received a telegram from the mayor of Lincoln saying that the city is threatened with being wiped out by fire. The mayor is appealing for help from all towns around. I have wired that I am sending one fire company. Captain, I have chosen your company to go. The railway people, in ten minutes, will have ready a special train consisting of an engine, a caboose and two flat cars. You will get your apparatus and company aboard within that time."

All these directions were rattled off about as fast as this businesslike chief could speak.

"Yes, sir," replied Young Wide Awake, with a salute. "Any further orders, chief?"

"On arrival at Lincoln you will report either to the mayor or to Chief Bascomb, of the Lincoln Fire Department. You will receive all further orders there."

"Yes, sir."

By a motion of his hand, while listening, Young Wide Awake had signaled to Hal to hurry the fast-arriving fire boys into their fire togs.

This was all but accomplished by the time that chief and captain ceased talking.

"That is all, captain," finished Chief Pelton, "except this: 'I have chosen your company because it could be gotten ready quicker than the company of Torrent One, most of whose men are at the mills. But I ask you to remember that, in Lincoln, you represent the reputation and the good name of Belmont.'"

"Chief," replied Young Wide Awake, straightening promptly, and saluting with military precision, "we will come back with our duty fully and finely done, or we won't have the cheek to come back."

"I'll trust you for that, Young Wide Awake," replied Chief Pelton, heartily. "I've had your company under my eyes at fires before this. Good luck to you, boys! I'll meet you at the depot."

Captain Dick Halstead, who had been delayed while talking to the chief, now rushed into the fire house.

"Hal," he called briefly, "you and the other fellows are ready. Start on the hustle for the depot. I'll catch up with you."

With a ringing whoop the Belmont fire boys ran the machines out, dashed up Holmes Street, and were on their way to do all that lay in their power to save a burning city.

Young Wide Awake dressed as if by magic.

In his boots, with shirt, white coat and white helmet on, and with trumpet hanging over his left hip, he made a picturesque appearance as he reached Main Street, turned and darted off in the track of his company.

Two blocks lower down on Main Street a drunken man, trying to walk fast, as if that would prove that he was not drunk, lurched swiftly around the corner.

Young Wide Awake saw him too late to avoid a partial collision.

Bump! The tipsy man was thrown against the building.

"Confound you!" roared the tipsy one, hoarsely. "Come back and (hic) 'pologize!"

But this Young Wide Awake, on the dead run as he was, had no time to do.

Cursing, the drunken man bent over, picked up a stone, and raised his arm to throw the missile.

Dick was already out of easy range, but the drunken man let his arm fall quickly enough.

For a mongrel coach dog, long, lean and hungry-looking, suddenly sprang out of a doorway straight at the drunken man.

It was white with black spots.

"Gr-r-r-r!" warned the dog, his teeth close to the tipsy one's leg.

Young Wide Awake, looking over his shoulder, saw the dog.

"Why, it's that poor four-legged tramp that I took into the butcher shop this morning and bought a square feed of old meat," uttered the young fire captain.

"Here, come here!" he called loudly to the dog as he ran, and then whistled sharply.

His sole idea was to call away the dog before he bit the tipsy, irresponsible man.

To Young Wide Awake's delight, the dog turned at the whistle, then came pelting down the sidewalk at a dead trot after our hero.

He soon caught up, and then ran just ahead, his tongue hanging out.

"Well, talk about gratitude!" cried Dick to himself as he ran. "That poor tramp, that cur, remembers that I bought him a square feed this morning. Now when he finds some one attacking me he's ready to take the fight on his own shoulders sooner than see me get hurt. Good dog! good fellow!" he called to the bedraggled coach dog, which wagged its tail and still ran.

Down at the depot freight siding the train stood already made up.

Trailing after our hero as he dashed up came the last members of Washington One, those of Belmont's fire boys who had been furthest from Holmes Street at the moment when the alarm came in.

Chief Pelton, out of his buggy, was busy helping in running some inclined planks up the side of one of the flat cars when Young Wide Awake arrived.

"Now up with the engine first! Lively, now!" sang out the chief.

Dick leaped up on to the flat car. He and several of the fellows helped to pull the hand engine up that inclined plane.

Then Chief Pelton sprang aboard, showing them how to fasten the hand engine securely in place.

Hal, in the meantime, was bossing the running up of the lighter hose-cart on to the hindmost flat car.

In a wonderfully short space of time the work was done, and done well.

"Captain," said the conductor of this special train, coming back, "this train is going to travel mighty fast. It'll be risky for those who stay on these flat cars. About two of you to each car, to watch your machines, I should say, and the rest of you in the caboose."

"Thank you," Dick acknowledged. "Hal, you and I will stay with the engine. Terry, pick out a fellow to stay on the flat car with you. Joe, take the rest of the crowd in the caboose, and keep them from falling out, if you can."

This last was said with a laugh.

"Terry, take me on the car with you," begged young Ted Lester, Kitty Lester's cousin, appealing to the young Irish foreman of the hose crew.

"Take you, is it?" echoed Terry. "Shure, Oi will, an' glad to. But hould on fast, Ted."

A shrill tooting came from the engine's whistle.

"Now you're off and away!" bellowed Chief Pelton after the Belmont fire boys, as the short special began to roll out on to one of the main tracks. "Good luck to you all!"

Yet the chief's voice shook a little, as if he had a sudden,

too-late, mysterious inner warning of disaster that might come to some of the members of this plucky fire company.

As they got under good headway, and Dick and Hal stood holding to the hand engine, Dick heard a low whine, next an eager yelp at his feet.

Turning and looking down, he beheld that same coach dog that he had fed, and which had afterwards leaped to his protection.

"Why, hullo, old fellow!" greeted Young Wide Awake. "So you felt that you had to come, too, did you?"

"Why not?" laughed Hal. "He may prove to be our mascot. Every fire company ought to have one."

"How would that suit you, old fellow?" laughed Young Wide Awake, looking again at the dog.

Three short, sharp, joyous yelps came from the dog's throat as in answer.

"Why, I believe he's agreeing to it," smiled Dick. "Now, see here, old fellow, it's a hard and responsible job being mascot for a crowd like ours."

Whining wistfully, the coach dog thrust its cold muzzle gently into Dick's nearer hand.

"He takes the job!" laughed Hal. "He wants it badly, too, does—— Say, what are we going to call our mascot?"

"From my remembrance of him as he bolted down the street with me," smiled Dick, "I'm inclined to think we'd better call him Trot. How about that, doggy? Does 'Trot' suit you for a name?"

Wagging his tail fast, the tramp dog whined coaxingly.

"Motion put, seconded and carried," laughed Hal. "He's our mascot and his name is Trot."

They were whizzing now, the cars swaying and bumping as the light train raced over the tracks, for when a city is threatened by the fire demon relief trains must travel fast.

Over the great steel drawbridge they flew, and then past the neighboring town of Norwich, on the opposite side of the Fraser River from Belmont.

Lincoln, a busy, thriving young city of some thirty-three thousand souls, was some twenty miles from Belmont.

Lincoln's fire must be a serious one, since that city had two steam fire engines, a chemical engine, and hose wagons, hook and ladder trucks and other apparatus in keeping.

"The city is in danger of burning down, was what Chief Pelton said," Dick muttered to his chum. "It'll be great drill work for us, Hal, old fellow—a great chance, too, to show whether we've really any of the fireman's stuff in us."

"I'm glad we're going under the captain who commands us," thought Lieutenant Hal Norton to himself. "That's what gives us our biggest chance of winning out as fire-fighters."

The caboose ahead shut off a good deal of their view.

Yet, when they had covered a few miles more, Dick leaned out as far as he deemed safe over the side of the train.

"There's the smoke, Hal!" shouted Captain Halstead, above the roar and rattle of the flying train. "Whew! but it looks like a big one, and no mistake."

Hal, too, was leaning out, taking in the clouds of dense smoke that rose to the sky ahead.

Work cut out for us to-day," breathed Dick. "Oh, gracious!"

This last exclamation was called forth by the sudden danger of Trot.

For that dog, having followed his new master too close to the edge of the flat car, was suddenly all but pitched overboard by a sharp swaying of the train.

Just in time Dick bent down, gathered the dog in his arms, and fell back, sitting down.

As if realizing that this act had saved his life, Trot looked lovingly up into Young Wide Awake's face, then whined and tried to lick that face.

"If our mascot—our luck—is worth having, he's worth taking care of," uttered Dick, fishing in a pocket for a bit of cord.

He found it, fastened it to Trot's collar, and made the other end fast to a wheel of the hand engine.

As they raced onward the clouds of smoke looked vastly larger.

Then, noonday though it was, as the train neared Lincoln, great blotches of red flame could be seen rising above the threatened city.

"Whole blocks must be on fire already," quivered Young Wide Awake, pityingly. "Oh, the loss both of property and life—perhaps!"

In the caboose the fire boys of Belmont were staring from the windows.

Every heart thrilled with the thought of the deeds that must lie ahead.

Then they ran past the suburbs of Lincoln, as yet untouched by the raging flames.

Next, the train began to slow up as it came close to the business heart of the endangered little city.

Then with a sudden jolt the train stopped altogether.

Belmont's fire boys were on the spot where the bravest of fire-fighters were sadly needed.

A day of duty and disaster!

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE THICK OF IT!

Nor had the train stopped more than five seconds ere Dick and Hal began to shove down the planks that were to make the engine's runway.

On the other car Terry and Ted were equally busy.

"Get out of this caboose on the jump, every snoozer of you!" roared Joe. "Fall in by your crews—engine men to the front car, hose men to the last car!"

Under Young Wide Awake's directions, the runways from both cars were speedily in order.

"Lively, now! Don't make any flukes, either!" shouted Young Wide Awake. "A blazing city's homes are at stake!"

Right gallantly the Belmont boys rolled down good old Washington No. 1.

From the rear car the hose wagon was lowered in the same time.

"It's a scramble for a fireman's record!" cheered Young Wide Awake. "Come on!"

They had landed their machines at the lower end of a freight yard, not many hundreds of yards from the edge of the great blaze that seemed destined to destroy the city of Lincoln.

Placing himself at the head of the company, Young Wide Awake fairly sprinted.

There having been no one to meet the Belmont boys and give them their orders, our hero had decided that the easiest way would be to head straight for the blaze.

He felt certain that there they would find officials competent to give orders.

But, though they had not been met, they had at all events been seen from afar.

They had not covered more than a third of the short distance to the fire belt when a buggy was seen rapidly approaching.

Clang! clang! came the jangling notes from the gong in front of the buggy's dasher.

In the buggy sat a man in the full uniform of a fire department official.

"Stop!" shouted this official, raising his hand, then reining in his own horse.

Then came the first question:

"Who are you? Where from?"

"Washington No. 1. Belmont," Young Wide Awake answered, leaping forward and saluting. "Are you Chief Bascomb?"

"No; Lane, deputy chief. Who commands you, boy?"

"I am Captain Halstead, commanding this company."

"You!"

Deputy Chief Lane's cry was one of undisguised astonishment.

"Yes, sir," Dick replied, with another salute.

"A boy for a captain?"

"Yes, sir."

"And all your company mere boys?"

"We're boys," Young Wide Awake admitted quietly.

"About the 'mere' part of it it wouldn't become me to say."

"Why didn't Belmont send a real fire company?" demanded Deputy Chief Lane.

Then, realizing that he had put the question in an offensive way, Deputy Chief Lane went on:

"I beg your pardon, captain. I——"

"No need to apologize, sir," replied Young Wide Awake, again saluting. "We know that we're boys, and that we look it."

"But your folks at home couldn't have understood. This is a fearful day's work to be done."

"We'll do all the work that our endurance will stand for," promised Young Wide Awake, quietly.

"But the danger——"

"Danger is the fireman's lot, sir."

"But your folks at home couldn't have understood," complained Deputy Chief Lane, anxiously, "or they wouldn't have let you come. This is deadly work to-day. Already we've had three firemen killed and more than a dozen sent to the hospital."

Not a few hearts in the young Belmont company throbbed at that news.

It is never pleasant to hear that death is at hand, not waiting to be sought.

But Young Wide Awake replied, as calmly as before:

"All we ask, chief, is to be assigned to our post. Where do you want us?"

"What can you do, captain?"

"Anything that any other firemen can—or we'll go down in the trying."

"Are you at home on ladders?"

"Yes; we've got good climbers and scalers."

"How far can you throw a stream?"

"We've made a hundred and twelve feet with our engine."

Deputy Chief Lane opened his eyes in surprise.

"And can your boys, captain, stand the strain of long pumping?"

"They always have, sir."

"Our need is great, captain. I shall have to try your company somewhere at some point in the fire."

"Show us where, sir," begged Young Wide Awake. "You'll know in the first five minutes that we don't ask any consideration on account of being what you called 'mere boys.'"

"Follow me, then, Captain Halstead. I'll drive slowly."

"Take your own speed chief, and we'll pile after you."

"No, no. I don't want to take you to your work all winded and played out."

"He must think we're a pet football team from a primary school," grunted Hal, as Lane turned and drove away at a very slow trot, and Belmont's boys followed at their easiest jog.

"He's afraid of wearing us out," smiled Dick.

"Then before the day is over he may know us better."

Skirting the nearest burning block, Deputy Chief Lane drove down a side street, halting at the corner.

Here a crowd of citizens had formed a bucket brigade, trying, in the absence of an engine, to pour water in through the windows of a house that had begun to blaze inside.

"Here you are, Captain Halstead," cried Lane, reining up. "If you can stop the blaze in this house you may be able to stop the spread of the flames through the block."

"All right, sir," Dick answered, through his trumpet, now, for he itched to get into action. "Where are you, Washington One? Hustle the hose off and couple it! Live-ly, now!"

Ordinary carpenter's ladders were already up against the side of the first house in this block to get afire.

As Deputy Chief Lane watched the Belmont boys swing

their engine into place by the hydrant, and watched the swift, nimble, accurate work of these "mere boys" he opened his eyes in a good deal of astonishment.

"By George, they work like veterans!" he gasped.

Young Wide Awake turned his trumpet on the men of the city who had been serving as a bucket brigade.

"If you citizens want to stay inside the lines now, get together and bring furniture and other stuff out from the ground floor while it's safe. Foreman Rourke, go with them and see that everything is done right. Lester!"

Ted darted forward at his captain's side at the summons.

"Stick close by me," ordered Dick. "Understand?"

"I don't want to be anywhere else," Ted muttered, for he felt that keeping close to his captain would mean getting into the tightest places in the day's work.

"Grip this nozzle! Now up the ladder with it behind me!"

Young Wide Awake was already making a swift ascent of the ladder.

Ted, though much smaller and lighter, made manful work of getting up after his captain and of helping to drag the hose.

"Look at even that little monkey get up the ladder with the hose!" gasped Deputy Lane.

Dick was over the sill, Ted after him.

Then young Lester leaned out again, to bawl:

"Play away, Washington One!"

The stream filled and bulged the hose.

Deputy Chief Lane leaped from his buggy, intent on scaling that ladder to see how well the water was being served.

But again he saw Ted's head at the window.

"Cap'n says send up four axemen, two pikemen!" bawled down Ted.

Lieutenant Hal Norton heard and obeyed.

Lane stood back until these six young fire-fighters had seized their tools and gone up the ladder.

Then the deputy followed.

Though he reached the room not many seconds after the last of the axemen, Lane found the four wielders of the blades already busy ripping up a portion of the flooring, through which thick smoke was coming.

The pikemen leaped in, prying up the loosened boards.

"Jove! But these young fellows do know what they're doing," gasped the Lincoln fire department official.

Young Wide Awake, beside issuing the orders, was himself directing the water.

"We can stop this house, sir," Dick found time to shout. "That is, if it doesn't catch again from outside."

"Save this house, and stop the one opposite from catching, captain," rejoined the deputy, "and I believe you'll keep the blaze from spreading in this direction."

"We'll do it, sir, if it can be done," replied Dick, not raising his eyes, but watching his stream.

"I'm beginning to feel sure of you young fellows, captain!" glowed the deputy.

"You'll know before the day's over whether we're any good," smiled Young Wide Awake.

"My opinion of you already is such that I'm going to leave you for a little while," replied the deputy, going back toward the window. "You know what's wanted, and you seem to be able to do it."

With that Lane got out through the window.

A clang from his buggy gong a moment later showed that the deputy chief was headed for other fields of activity.

It was hard work here. The house had caught in good earnest.

From the fire being in the flooring, Young Wide Awake could only conclude that the blaze here had started from sparks drifting in through open windows.

The flames out in this room, they hurried into another.

In less than ten minutes the Belmont boys had the flames subdued in this house.

As a final precaution, Young Wide Awake led his crew up to the roof, where they used the hose to good advantage in wetting it down.

"It's catching on the roof opposite," nodded Hal.

"Down and over that way, then," ordered Young Wide Awake.

This second house was soon wet down on roof and walls, while other members of the fire crew closed and bolted some of the upstairs windows that had been left open.

From here they went to the adjoining houses, wetting roofs and walls wherever the flying sparks from up the street could reach.

"We've stopped the spread of the fire in this direction, anyway," muttered Captain Halstead, mopping his drenched brow.

Deputy Chief Lane drove up at this moment.

"You've done mighty well, boys," he called. "I wish we could do as well at every point of the fire."

"It looks to me, sir," reported Young Wide Awake, "as if we could leave this section now. The houses up the street that are doomed are caving in now. They'll send no more sparks to endanger this end of the street."

"You're ready for more duty elsewhere?" asked Lane.

"Ready for duty anywhere, as long as the call lasts," replied our hero, promptly.

"We could use six more fire companies if we had 'em," gritted Lane. "Follow me, then."

He turned, driving back down the street, crossing into another street, and again entering a burning section of the town.

Above them was a solid block of doomed buildings, blazing furiously.

Twenty fire companies could not have saved that doomed block.

On the corner below, near which the Belmont fire boys had halted, a four-story dwelling was in flames.

Just across the street was a vacant corner lot.

"Ain't this awful!" gasped Lane. "It's like this for a third of a mile, too!"

"The fire can be checked here," declared Young Wide Awake.

"My idea," explained Lane, "is to blow up the house next to that blazing one."

"Blow up a house that isn't on fire yet?" demanded Halstead. "Deputy, that seems a needless waste of property."

"But what else can we do?"

"Blow up the house that's on fire."

"And spread blazing timbers all over the adjoining houses?"

"It won't spread the fire; it will check it," argued Young Wide Awake. "Touch off the dynamite on the parlor floor, and the house would simply cave in. So much of it is burning now that it wouldn't take much to bring the blazing structure down."

"The argument sounds good," agreed Deputy Lane.

"There's no time to argue about it, sir. We can lose the street while we're talking about it."

"Have you got any dynamite?" queried Lane.

"Of course not. We don't carry it. Haven't you any?"

"I can get some," replied the deputy.

"If you'll get it, then I'll throw water over the next house."

Hal had already seen to the coupling of the hose, and the stream was ready.

As Lane drove away, Hal and Joe Darrell directed the stream against the house next to the blazing one.

"Where are you going?" asked Ted, darting forward as Young Wide Awake hurried from the spot.

"Going into the burning house, Ted, to see where the dynamite can best be laid."

Nor did our hero discover, until he was battling against the smoke in the front hallway of the dwelling, that Ted Lester was at his heels.

"Get back out of this, Ted," ordered Captain Halstead.

"I don't want to," objected Ted. "If you get caught in here, I'm on hand to get you out or get help."

Young Lester stayed close to his young chief.

Dick quickly decided in favor of a middle room on the parlor floor as being the place where dynamite could be most effectively placed.

Crack! smash! Young Wide Awake began chopping into the solid woodwork of the wall to cut out a "nest" for the coming charge of dynamite.

"Run to the door, Ted, and see if Lane is back with the explosive," directed Young Wide Awake.

He kept at his chopping, working briskly, until Ted and Lane came in together.

"That's what I call bully preparation," nodded Lane, approvingly.

"Got the sky-high with you, chief?" queried Young Wide Awake, stepping back from the "nest," a grimy, sooty young fireman.

They placed the charge quickly, set and started the fuse, then—bolted.

Out in the street Hal had drawn the fire company back,

while the police had driven the throng of citizens down almost to the next block.

As the three from the house came darting out, they found the street clear ahead of them.

But Hal was shouting, his voice drowned in the roar and racket.

Young Wide Awake halted, turned and looked back at the burning house.

As he did so his heart stood still with the sudden sickness of an awed pity.

At a window on the top floor a woman leaned out, shrieking. In her hand she held what looked to be a steel-bound box.

Plainly she had slipped into the house much earlier in search of valuables belonging to her.

Now she was trapped by the flames, unable to get down—trapped at the top of a house which at any second would totter and crumble through an explosion of dynamite.

"We can't leave her there to die like that!" panted Young Wide Awake.

He had turned and was running back to the blazing house.

"Here, you young madman!" roared Deputy Chief Lane, running up beside him. "That woman can't be saved, and you'll only go to your death! Come back!"

As Lane reached out, however, to catch him, Captain Halstead tripped him and darted on.

"Stay right where you are!" roared Dick. "We'll get to you!"

Then he dashed into the house.

CHAPTER V.

YOUNG WIDE AWAKE, MADMAN.

As Young Wide Awake rushed into the house he had one sole idea in his mind for the moment.

That was to reach the dynamite, stamp out the fuse, seize the explosive and get it out of doors.

True, the dynamite might explode, wrecking the house, just at the moment when he reached it.

"That's the fireman's chance," he gritted.

The smoke in the hallway was more stifling than before as he battled his way through it.

But he found the dynamite, with the fuse almost at the point of explosion.

"Ten seconds more, and I'd have been traveling skyward," he chuckled grimly, as he put out the fuse.

Seizing the explosive, he darted through the hallway to the door.

Out in the street, Ted Lester had been having a hard time of it getting away from Deputy Chief Lane.

This, however, Ted suddenly accomplished by slipping out of his coat and scooting.

He came darting up the steps just as Young Wide Awake reached the door.

"Here's the dynamite, Ted. Take it and rush with it away from the flames," ordered Captain Halstead.

Ted obeyed like a flash.

Dick, who had hardly paused, now turned and made his way up the stairs.

The first flight was not so difficult, but on the second flight of stairs the smoke was so intense and the heat so high that Young Wide Awake barely got through that zone of suffocation alone.

On the third flight it was a little easier, though the ascending-hot air all but strangled him.

"No woman could live through that," quivered the boy, as he reached the top of the third flight. "We'll have to get down some other way."

In a front room he found the woman crouching by the sill, leaning her head far out for air as she shrieked.

"I'm here, madam," said Young Wide Awake, quietly, as he touched her on the shoulder. "Now we've got to find a way out."

The woman turned, sprang up and uttered a cry of joy.

"You can save me?" she cried breathlessly. "Can you carry me down the stairs? I'm too weak to walk."

"Madam, the stairs are impassable now. It would be death for you to try to take you down that way."

"Oh, then, what——"

"Wait. I must see what I can do."

Leaning out at the window, Young Wide Awake brought his trumpet to his mouth as he roared down:

"Have you got any ladders near?"

Lane was there, and so were the Belmont boys, who had come closer, dragging their apparatus with them.

"No ladder near," bellowed up Lane.

The woman heard.

She had been standing at our hero's side, looking rather hopeful.

Now, as she heard the deputy chief's answer, she suddenly reeled, then plunged and fainted on the floor.

Dick heard her fall, but paid no heed at the moment.

"You'll have to bring the life net, Hal," he shouted. "And hurry up! It's stifling up here!"

With a whoop the Belmont boys sprang for the net, which was fastened to the rear of the hose-cart.

Every one of them ran to place as it was spread.

Then Young Wide Awake turned to flash a swift look at the woman.

"Can't bring her to here, and without water, either," he grumbled.

There was but one thing that was possible.

He could not hurl her from the window alone.

"I'll have to jump with her in my arms," muttered the young fireman.

He picked her up, rejoicing to find how light she was.

The woman, who must have been near forty, did not weigh more than a hundred pounds.

But suddenly Dick Halstead put her down again.

"It would be a shame to forget the thing that she risked her life to get," he muttered.

Picking up the steel-bound box, he yelled down:

"Let this drop in the net. Then get it."

He saw Terry's hands close upon the box and bear it away.

Once again our hero picked up the little woman.

Then he appeared in the window-way, stepping out on a coping below.

For only an instant did he stand there, but Hal saw and guessed that their captain meant to make the jump double.

"Hold on for all you're worth!" bawled Young Wide Awake. "We're coming—now!"

He made the leap, after carefully judging the distance.

Down they shot, and as they fell Dick turned over so that he landed in the net upon his back.

He held the woman away from him.

She did not get the jar that came to this splendid young fireman.

Then tender hands reached her out of the net, bearing her hastily down the street to some place where she could be attended to.

To one of the woman's friends Terry handed the box.

Then from the crowd, kept back by the police, came the wildest cheering.

It was for Dick Halstead, though he hardly heard the racket.

"Now, sir," he said to Deputy Chief Lane, "I'll go back and place another charge of dynamite."

"I reckon I can go with you, if you've got the nerve left for that," retorted the Lincoln fire official.

Together they made the journey into the house, groping through the smoke.

The charge laid, they retreated in hot haste.

Nor had they gone two hundred feet from the house when a dull boom sounded.

The blazing house swayed, tottered, then caved in, coming down in an almost formless mass of ruins.

"Forward with Washington One!" roared Young Wide Awake. "Hustle it forward and get the stream turned on the ruins. Pump like mad, you fellows on the bars!"

"You see, sir," Dick was able to say to Deputy Chief Lane, five minutes later, "we were able to save a good house, and the spread of fire is checked in this direction."

"You've sure got a genius for fighting fire at railroad speed," admitted Lane, with honest admiration.

The clanging of a gong drew their attention to an on-coming buggy.

"Here's Chief Bascom coming himself to see what we're doing," announced Deputy Lane.

Bascomb, a portly, keen-eyed man of nearly sixty, listened and looked attentively while Lane and our hero explained how the spread of the fire had been checked at this point.

"You've done well, Lane," commented the chief, briefly.

"Chief, you can safely give most of the credit to young Halstead. He is so boyish-looking that I was afraid of his help, but he has proven himself ahead of most older firemen."

"We're going to save the rest of the residence section now," went on Chief Bascomb, hurriedly. "I am grouping most of the fire companies in the business section two blocks east. We've got a tough, hard fight on our hands here. Captain Halstead, are you and your youngsters fagged out?"

"We don't know what the word means," laughed Dick.

"Bring them over, then, Lane," ordered the chief, and gave a brisk direction.

Seating himself once more in his buggy, Deputy Lane led the way, Belmont's boys dragging their machines at a trot.

Now they found themselves halted on one of the principal business streets of Lincoln.

Three store buildings had caught fire from the rear.

As all of the stores contained valuable property, it was highly important to save them; if this were not possible, then the goods must be got out.

"Pardon me," muttered Lane in our hero's ear, "but you trust to the honesty of all your fellows, don't you?"

"Of course," replied Dick, flushing.

"I want to send you into that jewelry store. It wouldn't be the place to trust fellows who are not honest."

"I'd almost stake my soul on every one of our fellows," rejoined Young Wide Awake.

"Sail in, then. That's the proprietor, Sawburn, standing in the middle of the street in front of his store. He'll go in with you. There'll be another company here in a jiffy to help out."

The hose being coupled, and axemen and pikemen provided with their tools, Dick gave the word to get into the store.

Sawburn, who had been waiting, unlocked the front door, and Belmont's fire boys went in with a rush.

The police, few in number, were keeping straggling fire lines.

At one side stood a short, tough, evil-eyed young fellow, who watched the Belmont boys enter with an ugly sneer on his face.

"Confound that young Halstead!" he grunted. "I hope something falls on him big enough to pin him down for good!"

He had spoken more loudly than he realized, for a well-dressed, slim young man right behind him heard and looked sharply at him.

"Pardon me," said the slim young man, touching the tough young man on the shoulder. "But have you any objection to coming back a little way? I'd like a word with you."

"Cert," grunted the tough.

He was Rack Evans, side partner of Sliney Gamp.

These two were a pair of toughs who made their headquarters in Norwich, the little town across the river from Belmont.

Both Gamp and Evans had had trouble with our hero before.

For one thing, Young Wide Awake, aided by Terry

Rourke, had administered a good thrashing to the pair for annoying Kitty Lester and Miss Faith Vane.

At other fires Dick had had this pair thrown outside the fire line as suspicious characters who might be looked upon to rob burning houses.

For more reasons that one, Sliney Gamp and Rack Evans wanted to even up things with Captain Dick Halstead.

The slim youth who had just spoken to Evans was none other than Clarence Putney, who had returned to his home in Lincoln.

"You hate that fellow, Halstead?" whispered Putney, eagerly.

"What's that to you?" demanded Evans, looking over the well-dressed one suspiciously.

"It may be something to you," returned Clarence, coaxingly. "I, too, have a grudge against that fellow, Halstead."

From that moment Rack and the dude got on well together.

"Sure I can do it—trust me," whispered Rack, after a moment more of conversation. "But I need a fireman's helmet, or something like that, to get through the lines."

"There's your chance," whispered Putney, pointing to a fireman of one of the local companies, who was being carried through the fire lines, unconscious.

Rack nodded and jumped. Just as the unconscious fireman's helmet dropped from his head, Rack snatched it up.

For a few steps he followed those who were carrying the injured fireman.

Then, suddenly, seeing that no one was watching him, Rack stuffed his cap into one of his pockets, quickly placing the helmet on his head.

With a smirk on his evil face, Rack Evans strolled back to where Putney stood.

"Take this," whispered Putney, tucking some money quietly into Rack's hand. "There'll be a lot more if you do a good job."

"Trust me," whispered Rack, and made for the fire-lines.

He passed through and made his way into the jewelry store.

CHAPTER VI.

WASHINGTON ONE'S DISGRACE.

Young Wide Awake and his fire-fighters had struck another hard task.

In these three stores the blaze had already gained considerable headway at the rear.

Another hand-engine had come to the relief of the young Washingtons, while one of Lincoln's steam fire engines had been sent for.

One of Lincoln's protective companies had been in the store ahead of the Belmont boys and had covered the show-cases.

Protective companies are found in nearly every city.

These protective companies are hired by the big fire insurance companies.

It is the duty of these men to save goods in stores and furniture in dwellings from damage by smoke and water, thus lessening the losses of the insurance companies.

As the Belmont boys fought the flames, Jeweler Sawburn's showcases were covered under protecting, thick rubber blankets.

"We've got to have the steam fire engine in a hurry, if we're to save this block," reported Young Wide Awake, as Chief Bascom made his way into the store.

"That's right. I've telephoned for it, and it is on the way," replied the chief. "I've just sent Lane over to fight the flames by the gas works, and I've got to be on the jump again. Halstead, are you willing to take command here?"

"Take command? Of course, chief, if you haven't some better man to take the command."

"From what Lane tells me, and from what I see myself, I'd rather have you in command here, Captain Halstead."

Dick turned to Hal.

"Take command here, old fellow. I've got to go outside with the chief."

With that, Young Wide Awake followed Mr. Bascomb.

But some one else followed our hero: Ted Lester caught at his arm, whispering hoarsely:

"Take me along as your aide, will you?"

"Captain Green," called Bascomb, loudly, and the captain of the other hand-engine company came up at a run.

"Captain Green, I am leaving Captain Halstead here in charge. He's a boy, but I find that he's the one to be in command here. Kindly take your orders from him."

Captain Green, a lanky man of forty, looked astonished, but nodded.

And now the steam fire engine company came up at a gallop.

As the men piled out of the patrol following, Bascomb passed the word for Captain Sommers.

"Sommers, this is Captain Halstead. I'm leaving him here in command. Report to Captain Halstead until relieved from this spot."

Another surprised fire captain there was, but Sommers nodded stiffly, then turned to our hero.

"Captain Halstead, I have two lines of hose. Where do you want them?"

"One through on the ground floor of that clothing store," Young Wide Awake answered promptly. "Send men with the other line of hose up through the second floor and back. I'll go with them to show them what ought to be done."

Bascomb nodded approvingly, for this was just the disposition he would have made of the services of the steam fire engine.

By the time the chief was driving away, Dick was leading the men with that second line of hose up to the second story.

He was just in time here, for the fire was breaking through the floor.

For half an hour Young Wide Awake flew from one part of his command to another.

Wherever he appeared the battle against the flames went on harder.

Then at last he had the satisfaction of finding that the spread of the fire at this point had been checked.

He went back into the street, followed by Ted, who in that short time had discovered three different points at which the walls were hot, and this information had shown the fire-fighters where to direct their next efforts.

Hal, finding that his efforts were needed no longer, had stepped out into the street for a few breaths of fresh air.

"How goes the fire through the rest of this part of town?" asked Lieutenant Hal.

"Blessed if I've had time to notice," laughed Dick. "Hullo! here comes Lane now. He'll have some news."

"All safe here?" shouted Lane, as he reined up his steaming horse close to the young fire-fighters.

"Looks all right, don't it?" smiled Dick. "Everything is done here, except to play water on for a while."

"Then I guess the rest of the city is saved," exclaimed the deputy chief. "Bascomb said this spot was the key to what was left of the situation. Things will smoulder for a few hours, but there won't be any more spread to the fire. Halstead, I don't know how to thank you, or to tell you what I think of you. You've checked the spread of this disaster at three points. You've done more to save Lincoln to-day than any other one person."

Dick reddened a bit with pleasure.

"I'm glad you're satisfied, Mr. Lane, that boys can fight fire."

"Oh, drop that, won't you?" grinned Deputy Lane, protestingly.

"Mr. Lane! Mr. Lane!"

It was Sawburn, the jeweler, who was calling out so excitedly.

He came running from the doorway of his store now, followed by a policeman.

"Mr. Lane, I've just been examining my showcases," cried the jeweler.

"That was wise. Nothing wrong, I hope."

"Nothing wrong!" gasped Sawburn. "Mr. Lane, the case containing the most valuable goods was broken open in the excitement."

"What's that?" cried the deputy, sharply. "Anything gone?"

"I've been robbed of over twelve thousand dollars' worth of stuff," almost screamed the jeweler.

That news was enough to bring Deputy Lane out of his buggy at a jump.

"This is mighty serious, Sawburn," he cried.

"Serious!" echoed the jeweler. "I should say it is."

"Halstead," demanded Lane, turning upon our hero, "did you see any suspicious-looking characters around the place?"

"I don't remember any," Dick replied quickly. "Of

course, I left the rounding up of suspicious characters to the police."

"None but firemen got into that jewelry store. I know that," broke in the policeman with Sawburn.

"I'll turn out my company and have 'em searched," uttered Dick, gravely. "And I'll stand the first search myself."

"That's right!" screeched a voice from the crowd beyond. "Search Halstead first!"

Then the owner of that voice kept quiet to escape detection.

"Search me now," begged Dick, turning to the policeman, who stepped forward. "Ted, get half of the fellows out now. When they've been searched we'll send 'em back to relieve the other half."

"Thunder! But if any of our fellows have touched any of the jewelry I hope they'll be discovered," blazed Hal, seriously.

The policeman was going carefully through Dick's clothing.

"This anything of yours, Mr. Sawburn?" asked the officer.

He held out two cards, to which were fastened diamond pins.

Dick Halstead gasped in the sheerest amazement.

Then his brain whirled as the officer produced three rings handsomely set with jewels.

"Halstead! You! Good heavens!" gasped Deputy Chief Lane.

"This is some infernal put-up job," shuddered Dick, his face first blazing, then ghastly white. "I never placed those things in my pockets. I didn't steal that jewelry. Why, almost any one in Belmont would swear to my honesty! I—I can't understand it."

His brain swam so that he reeled.

Hal caught him, supporting him.

Ted came back, supported by several of the fellows.

"You identify those jewels as your property, Mr. Sawburn?" demanded the policeman.

"I certainly do," quivered the jeweler, blazing angrily with his eyes at Young Wide Awake. "So this splendid Young fireman is at heart a thief, eh? He wears the fireman's uniform only that he may steal?"

"That's a lie, confound you!" roared Dick, steadying himself and striding forward, his fists clenched and raised. "Take that back, you hound, or I'll make you swallow your words whole. I'm no thief!"

"You bet yure loife he ain't!" snarled Teddy Rourke, bounding in at our hero's side.

Angry protests came from other Belmont boys, as they crowded around.

Had not the policeman acted quickly, the jeweler might have been harmed, for the Belmont boys were now mad all the way through.

Deputy Chief Lane pulled Terry back, while the policeman, stepping between our hero and the jeweler, pushed Dick roughly back.

"See if he has my ruby necklace," appealed Sawburn. "That's the most valuable piece of all—worth five thousand dollars."

"Stand still while I go through the rest of your pockets," ordered the policeman, gruffly.

For an instant Dick had a wild notion of pitching into the policeman and knocking him down.

Then, realizing the absurdity of such a row, he stiffened, drew himself up erect, and replied:

"Go on with your search, officer, and have done with it. I don't care what you find now, for it's all a put-up job, anyway."

Dick's other pockets were quickly turned inside out, but no other jewelry was found.

"What's the value of these articles, Mr. Sawburn?" demanded the officer, drawing out note-book and pencil.

"About three hundred and fifty dollars."

"I'll have to take the property to court, Mr. Sawburn," went on the officer. "Come along, Halstead."

"Where?" quivered Dick.

"To the lock-up, of course," retorted the policeman, grimly. "You didn't think I was going to take you to the theater, did you?"

Dick stood still, trembling.

"To the lock-up?" he quavered. "But I never took those things."

"You can tell that to the court. Come along!"

"You'll stop here just a bit, officer, I guess," interrupted Deputy Chief Lane. "I don't believe you quite dare to arrest a commanding officer of the fire department—at a fire like to-day's."

"This young fellow don't belong to the Lincoln Fire Department," protested the policeman.

"Not regularly, no," replied Lane. "But he came on a call to-day, and he's serving under Bascomb's orders and mine. Until he's relieved here he actually is a commanding officer of the fire department. Take him away from here, officer, at your own risk."

"Oh, if that's the way you look at it!" grumbled the policeman.

"You haven't searched the others," nudged the jeweler.

Two other policemen came up to help. Deputy Chief Lane, too, was impressed into the work.

Every fireman on duty at this spot was searched, but no more of the jewelry was found.

"There's some big mystery here," groaned the jeweler. "I've recovered only a trifle of the stolen stuff. There's the ruby necklace, the diamond cross, the pearl and emerald——"

"And I'm cocksure that somebody has put up a job on the young fireman who has done more than any one else to save the city of Lincoln to-day," broke in Deputy Chief Lane, indignantly. "Why, see here, Halstead has had plenty of chance to hide those little trinkets if he had known they were in his pockets. I believe, with him, that it was a put-up job."

"That'll be a good story to tell the court," muttered the policeman who had found the jewelry.

"Of course, Dick, old fellow," spoke up Hal, loudly and clearly, as he held out his right hand, "you don't imagine for an instant that any of your own crowd could believe you guilty for a second!"

"Those who think Dick guilty won't cheer—the rest will cheer like blazes!" shouted Joe Darrell.

Every Belmont boy on the spot at the moment joined lustily in the volleys of cheers that followed.

Captain Green and his men joined in the cheering, for they had been won to our hero in that stubborn fight against the flames.

Captain Sommers and his men came in a little late, but they got in the noise the instant that they understood what it was about.

Half an hour later Chief Bascomb arrived on the scene.

The fire was now subdued. Here and there were piles of blazing embers, but to these the Lincoln firemen could attend.

"The visiting fire companies are now dismissed, with all the heartiest thanks of Lincoln's citizens," announced Chief Bascomb.

The officer who had searched Dick now came again to our hero's side.

"You hear that?" demanded the bluecoat.

"Yes," Dick acknowledged.

"You're in my hands now. Come along!"

CHAPTER VII.

CAUGHT WITH THE GOODS.

It was a mournful procession that left the scene of the fire.

Dick's head was up, and there was a look of defiance in his eyes.

Yet that did not prevent him from being inwardly downcast.

Hal and Ted, Joe and Terry, walking by pairs, kept just behind our hero, who walked between the policeman and Deputy Chief Lane.

Sawburn, the jeweler, preferred to go on by himself.

Dick was taken to the nearest police station.

Here, amid silence from his friends, he was formally booked.

By the time this was done a justice for whom Bascomb, at Lane's request, had telephoned, arrived at the station-house.

"I wish to go on the bail-bond," remarked Lane to the justice. "I own a couple of houses that I'll give as security."

"You?" echoed Young Wide Awake, drawing back.

"Why not?" challenged Lane, smilingly. "I've been watching you at your duty for hours. I know that you're no coward, sneak, thief or shirk."

"But I didn't expect you to do this, Mr. Lane," the boy objected.

"Why not? Did you think the city of Lincoln would owe you such a debt as it does to-day, and no one in Lincoln step forward to prove the city's gratitude?"

Sawburn arrived at this moment. He was just in time to see our hero being admitted to bail.

"And I want to say right here and now," remarked Deputy Chief Lane, "that I know this to be an absurd charge. We never had a more splendid lot of young fellows within our borders than this same fire crew from Belmont, and Halstead is the best of 'em all. It's impossible for him to be a thief!"

It was dark as they came out of the station-house.

There on the sidewalk all of the young men shook hands warmly with Mr. Lane, then turned their faces toward the railroad tracks.

The other fellows of Washington No. 1 had hauled their machines down to the tracks.

There they sat or stood around, the most dejected-looking lot of young fellows imaginable.

But what a whoop they sent up when they saw Young Wide Awake walking briskly toward them.

In their first burst of joy they believed that he had been set free.

But even his being out on bail was something for which to be mighty thankful.

Yet after the first outburst of pleasure the old dejection settled down on them once more.

Their train was soon ready. The hand engine and the hose-cart were speedily loaded on and made fast.

And now, stretching, Trot, their mascot, appeared at one of the doors of the caboose.

Plainly the dog had imagined that when they left the train behind it was his bounden duty to guard it.

Now, however, without a word of command being spoken, Trot sprang nimbly down to the ground, next raced up the runway and took his post between our hero and the hand engine.

It was a cold, chilling, gloomy ride back to Belmont.

They had done their duty nobly, and would have gone home in all happiness had it not been for this outrageous mishap to their captain.

But now they could not help feeling that Dick Halstead's humiliation meant the disgrace of the whole fire company.

Nor had they been in the freight yards at Belmont two minutes ere the boys discovered that some one had taken the trouble to telegraph or telephone the whole story to Belmont.

As the dejected young firemen hauled their machines through the streets at a walk the people stared at them curiously, rather than with enthusiasm.

As the machines were housed, Joe Darrell stepped forward.

"Dick," he said huskily, "you know that we all stand with you to find out who put up that dirty job on you, and why?"

Young Wide Awake thanked them with resolute, smiling eyes, but his heart ached underneath.

At home he found a note from his mother stating that she would be busy at the office until late in the evening. She told him where to find his supper.

Supper! Dick had not felt as if he could eat anything until now.

But now he sat down and fell to with a splendid appetite, for he was fagged out in body and needed "new strength."

By the time that the meal was over, Hal Norton tapped at the door.

"You going up on the street to-night?" queried Hal.

"Going? Of course I am. I don't want people to think I am afraid to show myself."

They were soon joined on the street by other members of the company.

And now, very quickly, Dick discovered how many friends he had in Belmont—more, by far, than he had ever supposed.

Men and women came forward to him, some of them shyly, to express their sympathy and their positive conviction that he had not done any wrong.

"I wish some of these people were going to hear my case over at Lincoln," he smiled wistfully to Hal.

"You've got friends there, too, and you'll have more the next time you go back there," Hal replied.

Joe and Terry lurked nearby. Others of the company were above and below on Main Street, and some on the opposite side.

"It seems as if all our fellows were around to-night," observed Young Wide Awake to his chum.

"I guess they are," nodded Hal. "They're out waiting to hear some one say a word against you. Then there'll be a riot!"

"Why, there he is now, papa!" called a sweet voice in a low tone, yet loud enough to reach Dick Halstead's ears.

He started and tingled with pleasure as he saw the well-known Lester carriage turn and come in toward the curb.

Kitty Lester sat there, with her father and mother, and at Kitty's side on the front seat was Faith Vane.

A good many people in the neighborhood stared curiously as the carriage drew up and Mr. Lester leaned forward, thrusting out his hand.

"Halstead, my boy, we all want to shake hands with you! We have just heard from Ted of that nonsense over at Lincoln. Of course you know that we don't believe a word of it."

"I thank you for that, sir," replied Dick, gratefully, as he took the proffered hand.

Then he shook hands with Mrs. Lester, with Kitty and with Faith.

"Don't let it worry you a bit," urged Mr. Lester, cheerily. "We are under a great debt to you, Halstead, and now we shall have a chance to pay off a small part of the debt. Counsel of the best, and detectives if you need 'em, will be at your service. We'll knock that Lincoln matter higher than dynamite could."

Young Wide Awake tried to stammer out his thanks, and an assurance that he didn't want any help.

But Mr. Lester cut him short.

Then Faith inquired:

"It seems to me, Captain Halstead, that I see a lot of your men out to-night. Is it only young Mr. Rourke who stays indoors to-night?"

"Is it me ye're askin' about?" demanded Terry, softly, stepping out of the shadow of a doorway and lifting his hat. "Sure, Oi'm out!"

"How much?" asked Faith, blandly.

But Terry was not to be caught napping.

"How much am Oi out, is it?" he demanded, with a gallant look at Faith. "Sure, it's out most av me sleep Oi am for thinkin' av the pretty eyes Oi've seen lately!"

"At Lincoln?" demanded Miss Faith.

"At Lincoln," said Terry, solemnly, "Oi had no toime to look at as much as an eyelash on annything but a foireman."

Faith leaned back, as if not deeming it wise to carry the questioning any further.

But Terry, who had had his invitation, stepped to the side of the carriage, shaking hands with all, his gallant Irish heart showing in his beaming eyes.

Dick, chatting with Kitty and her mother, became conscious of another pair of eyes.

He half turned, to find Rack Evans stealthily regarding him.

Something jumped through Dick's brain at that instant.

"Why, confound it, I saw that fellow at Lincoln to-day—under a fireman's hat! I know I did! I'd have thought of it at the time if I hadn't been so infernally busy. That fellow's looks were a good bit changed by having his face under a helmet, but now I'm ready to swear that Rack Evans was in that jewelry store, playing fireman."

"Your thoughts seem far away," remarked Kitty.

Dick saw Chief of Police Jason Sharp approaching.

"Pardon me just one moment," begged our hero, and turned to meet Chief Sharp.

In a quick, flashing whisper Dick said enough to Mr. Sharp to make that active little man cast a swift look toward Rack.

That worthy, seeing the look, and beholding the chief coming toward him, turned and made a frantic bolt.

"After that fellow and catch him," roared Dick.

With the boys of Washington One on all sides, Rack had, indeed, a poor show to get away.

Yet before any human being could reach him, Trot, the mascot coach dog, darted out of the darkness somewhere in full, growling pursuit.

Trot made a spring, a nip, and caught firmly at the trousers by one of Rack's heels.

The catch threw Rack.

Before he could get up, Chief Sharp was standing over him.

"Rack," spoke the chief, quietly, "we don't care about seeing you here in Belmont."

"I'll go home to Norwich, then," whined Rack.

"Just before you go," mocked Sharp, "would you mind stepping into one of these stores and letting me look you over?"

"What for?" demanded the tough, uneasily.

"Just for my own satisfaction," replied Sharp, coolly.

Had there been any show at all for him, Rack would have bolted, or fought.

But this little chief of police was not a man to be fooled with, besides which about a score of Belmont's fire boys were grouped around him, while Trot kept growlingly alert just behind the tough.

"I suppose you've got me," uttered Rack, a ghastly pallor overspreading his face.

"Come," said Sharp, shortly.

He led Evans into the nearest store, Dick, Hal and Joe following.

"Don't let any more folks in," whispered Dick, and Joe stood on guard at the door, politely pushing back the eager throng that wanted to crowd into the store.

Sharp's movements were few, brisk and to the point.

He laid out on the counter a ruby necklace, a diamond cross and many other costly articles of jewelry.

"So you're the real thief?" demanded Dick, hotly. "You sneaked into that jewelry store, under a fireman's helmet, and made a haul?"

"It wouldn't do me much good to deny it, with the stuff found on me, would it?" demanded Rack, trying to grin cheerfully.

"And you stuck some of the jewelry in my pockets?" insisted Dick, his face hot with wrath.

"I s'pose I may as well acknowledge all that's coming," agreed Rack.

"Do you admit that you put those things in my pocket?" insisted our hero.

"Well, yes."

"Hurrah!" quivered Hal.

"Why did you do it?" Dick belched forth.

"Why, er—er—" Rack stammered.

"Who put you up to it?"

Dick fairly thundered that question.

Rack looked as if about to make a denial. But, his courage oozing, the detected tough faltered:

"I don't know his name."

"Describe the party—and do it right!"

Rack stammered out a description.

"Now, fellows," demanded Dick, turning to his friends, "both together. Whom does that description fit?"

"Clarence Putney!" answered Hal and Joe in one breath.

Dick, glancing swiftly out of the door, saw a cab that had been standing across the street starting to move away.

"Washington One!" bellowed Young Wide Awake, "don't let that cab get away until the fellow inside has shown himself!"

With a whoop the boys darted off, surrounding the cab, while the driver reached for his whip to bring it down over the horses.

"Driver, don't you try to get away until we've seen who is inside that cab!" roared Dick Halstead. "If you don't stop, we'll call the chief of police to look into this matter for you."

The driver hesitating, Terry and Slam Bang seized the bridles of the horses.

Then with a rush and a roar the youngsters pulled both cab doors open.

A tall, slim figure recoiled backward on the rear seat, as if trying to blot himself out of sight.

"Who is it?" called Dick, sharply.

"That dude, Putney!" came the chorused answer, in deep disgust.

Then, without waiting, the boys piled upon Putney, dragging him, shrieking with fear, out into the street.

"This fellow and Rack Evans put up the Lincoln job on me," shouted Dick, indignantly. "Evans has just been caught with a jewelry store about him, and has confessed that this fellow, Putney, put him up to the whole thing."

"Shall we march the dude to the lock-up?" demanded half a dozen boys, all of whom had a hand in holding Putney, who had been frightened speechless.

"Evans has got away," panted Chief Sharp, running up. "My back was turned but an instant, and he sneaked through the back of the store. But he left the jewels behind. Who is this frightened object in man's clothing?"

"This is the fellow," uttered Dick, crisply, "who, according to Evans, 'put him up to hiding some of the plunder in my pockets.'"

"Sorry we haven't got a better case against you, then," growled Jason Sharp, glaring at Putney, who cowered and whimpered.

"Can't you arrest this human knitting-needle, chief?" blurted Ted Lester, indignantly.

"I'm afraid I can't—not legally," replied Chief Sharp, shaking his head.

"Then will you be good enough to walk away for a few seconds, chief, and not ask any questions afterward?" propounded Joe Darrell, grimly.

Mr. Sharp walked back across the street, re-entering the store, where Hal and the storekeeper stood guard over the recovered jewels.

"Now, dudey boy," coaxed Joe, "come here!"

Joe grabbed the shivering figure by its coat collar and held it.

"Spread out, fellows, down the street, double-file," begged Joe. "We're going to let dudey run the gauntlet first and a race afterward."

In a double line the boys of Washington One extended down the street.

"Now, dudey, all ready for a run?" asked Joe, anxiously.

There was no response from Putney. All speech had been scared plumb out of him.

"One, two," counted Joe, "three—go!"

Thump! Joe's foot landed on Putney with a force that must have jarred his whole slim body.

Putney let out a yell and started.

He had sense enough left for but one thing—running.

How he did run! He had never made his long legs fly so before.

Once he was through the gauntlet, from which he received a fearful number of kicks and blows, Putney was by no means out of trouble.

Most of the fellows followed him, throwing any missile that came to their hands.

But at last they gave up the exciting chase in order to come back to the scene of the main excitement.

"Neither Evans nor Putney could keep away," Dick was explaining eagerly to the occupants of the Lester carriage. "Both had to come here to see how I stood my shame. First the sight of Rack Evans's face set my remembrance at work. Then, when he confessed, I guessed who must be in the cab across the street."

"The main point is," glowed old John Lester, with honest enthusiasm, "you're cleared of that miserable charge the same day it was made against you. No court could hold you now."

"No court will want to, in view of what I can testify to," put in Chief Jason Sharp, quietly.

There was no happier boy in America that night than Young Wide Awake was.

Beyond a question, there was no sorer dude in the country than was Clarence Putney by the time he reached home that night.

CHAPTER VIII.

A COWARD AND THE OTHER KIND.

The next day—Sunday—such machinery was put in motion that the case against Young Wide Awake was promptly dropped at Lincoln.

Jeweler Sawburn came over and identified his property.

He had now recovered all his missing jewels, and was correspondingly happy.

Later in the day the jeweler and Deputy Chief Lane arrived at Belmont.

"This whole miserable business is over, my lad," was Lane's greeting when the two visitors arrived at the little Halstead cottage. "The case against you is dropped. It's a little unusual, but Sawburn and I have been before the justice with an affidavit from your chief of police. Sawburn told the justice he wanted to drop the whole matter. So the justice agreed to drop the case and to release me from your bond. You won't have to go to Lincoln at all on this matter, and I congratulate you."

"And I've got to thank you a wonderful big lot, Mr. Lane, before I can be anywhere near even for your kindness," quivered Young Wide Awake.

"Madam," uttered the Lincoln Fire Department official, "I wish you could have seen this lad of yours yesterday. Really, Lincoln people give him the credit of saving the city from a fire that came near wiping us out."

"Heard anything about that fellow Putney to-day?" asked Dick.

"Yes," retorted Lane, with a snap of his jaws. "Halstead, it may surprise you to know it, but Putney's folks are really decent people. Putney's father heard of the affair—perhaps I may have dropped a hint to the old man about it. At all events, Putney's father, who owns a couple of mines out West, ships his son West to-morrow to work as a laborer in one of those mines. The old gentleman says he's going to see whether it's too late to make something like a man out of that boy. And I believe the old gentleman intends to make something like a cash payment to you for the harm his son tried to do you."

"Oh, I don't want Mr. Putney to do that," protested Dick, coloring.

"Now you let old Mr. Putney have his own way," urged Lane. "He's a mighty decent old man, and he won't try to do anything that isn't dead right."

Dick was at school bright and early Monday morning.

It was a clear, cold winter day, and every boy in town knew that skating was at its best on the Fraser River.

Early as the time was, while Dick stood at the gate of the High School yard, Ted Lester, who was in his last year at the grammar school, came by.

"Here's a note Kit asked me to give you," announced Ted.

"From your cousin?" asked Dick, his face tingling red with pleasure and surprise.

"Yep. Don't believe there's any answer to it," replied Ted; "leastways, not for me to take."

Dick hastily broke the seal on the envelope.

It was the first time he had ever seen Kitty Lester's fine, pretty handwriting.

But it was not the handwriting but the words that set Dick Halstead's blood to tingling.

For the brief note read:

"My Dear Mr. Halstead:

"Faith and I have received permission to go out on the river skating this afternoon, provided we can obtain the escort of young men who are reliable skaters and good company.

"Should you hear of two young men who answer to that description, would you mind telling them of the opportunity that is open for them to have their afternoon's sport spoiled by having two young ladies on their hands?

"You might telephone me if you should find two young men who are gallant enough to allow themselves to be imposed upon in this fashion. In any event I shall trust to hear from you. Very sincerely,

"CATHERINE LESTER."

"Huh?" remarked Ted, who couldn't help noting the delighted flush on our hero's face.

"Eh?" asked Dick, looking at the boy.

"Huh! You seem tickled about something."

"I am, Ted."

"Huh! That's all I've got to say about getting letters from girls."

"You don't get any, eh, Ted?"

"Huh! I'd like to see any girl who'd dare send me a note."

"Perhaps you will some day, Ted."

"Huh! Hope not. I hain't got much use for girls," admitted Ted.

"That's a queer remark from a fellow who has such a pretty and delightful cousin as you have," rebuked Young Wide Awake.

"Huh! If you ever see Kit get mad——"

"Stop that!" warned Dick. "If you don't, I may tell her what you say?"

"Who cares?" muttered the young reprobate, edging off a little. "If you do, I may be able to think up something to tell her about you!"

This was getting to be a bit too much.

Dick made a bolt after the little scapegrace, but Ted kept his distance well.

"Say, Dick," his last shot came, "don't go getting mixed up with girls. Keep away from 'em, and you'll find you're a heap smarter."

Then Ted broke and ran in earnest.

But Dick, looking up at the clock on the school, found that he had just about enough time to telephone.

This he did, reaching his desk just at the stroke of the bell.

It was not until recess that he found chance to say to young Rourke:

"Terry, I've been cheeky enough to invite Miss Lester and Miss Vane to go skating with us on the river this afternoon."

Terry's face went almost white.

"Come, come, now, ye spalpeen!" he quivered. "'Tis good-nathured Oi am, but Oi won't stand too much, aven from a frind."

"Then you're going to back out, Terry?"

"How can Oi back out av what Oi'm not in?" demanded Rourke.

"But surely you're in this, unless you skulk and disgrace me."

Thereupon Dick pulled out the note, which he passed to the astounded Irish boy.

"Pinch me," said Terry. "Shure, Oi'm draming!"

"It's a very real dream, then, Terry."

"But, shure, thim foine girls must be pokin' fun at us," remarked Terry, looking almost despondent. "They can't mane to go thravelin' around wid us. We haven't got the shtoyle."

"But you're going, Terry?" asked Dick.

"Going, is it?" repeated Rourke. "Wud Oi go into Heaven av St. Peter held the door open for me?"

Perhaps neither fared quite as well at his recitations that morning.

Certain it is that both fairly raced home, praying that

no fire alarm would come in to spoil the afternoon's happiness.

Both ate in a hurry, then spent much care in attiring themselves in their Sunday best.

Long before two o'clock the two young firemen met at a corner on Main Street.

From there they hurried down to the appointed place, near the great steel drawbridge.

"They're comin'—the darlin's!" exploded Terry, as, up the street, he caught sight of the Lester carriage.

Kitty and Faith were soon being helped to the ground, their skate bags being promptly taken charge of by their respective escorts.

"It was so good of you to ask us," murmured Kitty, as she rested a hand on Dick's arm and started toward the ice.

"So good of—us!" gasped Dick.

"Now, please, Mr. Halstead, don't remind me that the first hint had to come from us."

"But we wouldn't have dared——" suggested Dick, candidly.

"Do you think you'll grow in courage some day?" asked Miss Kitty.

Her tone, as well as the question, set Young Wide Awake's blood to dancing through his veins.

They found a seat outside a boathouse just at the edge of the ice.

Dick Halstead's heart was beating strangely as he went down on his knees and Kitty thrust out one perfectly booted little foot.

Terry, too, was having his own troubles with his pulse, as one of Faith Vane's tiny boots rested across his own devoted knee.

At last they were steel-shod and ready.

"Pardon us just one moment, will you, young ladies?" begged Dick, as he rose. "Terry and I want to try the ice, and also to make sure of ourselves on our own skates. It's for your own safety and comfort, you know."

Hearts bounding, the two young gallants skimmed away over the ice.

They were out of sight around the corner of the boathouse when Fred Parsons came scrambling down to the ice, a skate-bag swinging from one hand.

"Really, I am lucky, girls," declared Fred, his face glowing with pleasure. "I saw your carriage going down the street, and——"

"We shall see you on the ice this afternoon, then, shall we?" asked Miss Kitty.

"See me on the ice? Why——"

Fred came to an amazed, puzzled stop.

Faith got up and skimmed a short distance over the ice.

"What do you mean, Kit?" breathed Parsons.

"You look as if you were going skating, Fred."

"Why, of course I am, Kit, when you are."

"We have escorts this afternoon," said Kitty very quietly.

"Escorts——"

Fred looked at her sharply, turning a little pale.

"Yes. Mr. Halstead and Mr. Rourke have been kind enough to invite us out on the ice this afternoon."

"Dick Halstead and that—that—Irish boy?"

"Yes; they have gone off to try their skates. I think I hear them coming now."

"Kit," said Parsons, desperately, as he clutched at her coat sleeve, "is Halstead going to supplant me?"

"Supplant you?" cried Miss Kitty, tossing her head, as she rose. "You are speaking strangely. I have a right to accept any escort that I please."

"But is he going to be your escort after this, Kit?"

"That's rather more, I think, than Mr. Halstead himself would dare to ask me," retorted Miss Kitty, gliding away.

"Kitty," cried the disappointed young fellow, gliding after her, "are you cutting me out after this?"

"What nonsense!" uttered Miss Kitty, taking a faster stroke. "I am always glad to see you, Fred, except when I have a previous engagement. You'll pardon me now, won't you, for here comes my escort?"

Fred, without replying, and forgetting to lift his hat, made a swift dash away.

"That confounded puppy, Halstead, is getting in my way everywhere," scowled Fred. "I half believe he sent Joe Darrell out to start that trouble with Putney, which has ended in making people sneer at me, just because I was supposed to be Putney's friend."

Young Wide Awake, on approaching, had seen Parsons near Kitty, and had veered off, that he might not interrupt.

But now Kitty glided toward him, and he went to meet her. They joined hands and skated away.

"You skate beautifully, Miss Lester," Dick said admiringly.

"As well as most of the girls you've skated with?" Kitty challenged mischievously.

"I don't know that I ever skated with but one girl before."

"Oh!"

"That was Cousin Maud, when she visited us three years ago, at Christmas."

Terry, his honest face beaming, had gone off on a wide curve with Faith, who was as fine a skater as Miss Kitty was.

Dick whirled around, going backward, and looking into Kitty's bright face as he skated backward.

"Do you go backwards?" he asked.

"Any way."

He swung her and gently pushed on her hands, so that Kitty's own skating was little more effort than a mere glide.

"Oh, this is delightful!" she cried.

By the time that they had warmed up on the ice Dick discovered that Miss Kitty was, indeed, an accomplished skater. He learned, too, that she had learned under the most accomplished instructors in New York.

"No wonder you can skate," he murmured. "I feel like an awkward country boy with you."

"You don't look like one, anyway," replied Miss Kitty, so sweetly that Dick was wholly at his ease with her.

It was delightful to skate with this beautiful girl, holding her trim little hands in his.

He wished that he had been born in more fortunate circumstances in life, so that he might have the money that would be needed to cut a proper figure in the world in which Miss Lester moved.

Right then and there Dick was seized with a firm, new determination to make his way forward and upward in the world and to become rich.

They had skated for an hour, when Kitty discovered that Faith and Terry were seated on the bench by the boathouse.

"Will you glide in and ask Faith if she is tired yet?" requested Kitty.

Lifting his cap, Dick left her, starting at once for the shore.

Miss Kitty started, backward, out toward the middle of the river.

Parsons, coming down the ice, saw her, and saw his opportunity.

He skated toward her, and Kitty, seeing him coming, looked away and kept on going backward.

"Kitty," he asked, going up close to her, despite her efforts to get away, "are you going to throw me over for that fellow Halstead?"

"Throw you over?" questioned Kitty, looking away from him. "I don't understand, or I don't want to understand, such an expression."

"See here, Kit, I've been keeping company with you for a year."

"Have you?" inquired Miss Lester, blandly.

"You——"

"Kitty, skating backward, did not see where she was going.

Her ulster, almost wide open, spread so as to hide the danger from Fred.

Splash! A shriek! Kitty Lester had backed into an air-hole and disappeared through the ice.

Parsons, with a cry of fright, veered just in time to avoid going in after her.

For one horrified moment he stood still on his skates, at a distance of twenty feet from the air-hole.

Then, veering about, he skated like mad for the shore.

"Help!" he shouted hoarsely. "Help! Miss Lester is drowning under the ice!"

At the first appeal Dick Halstead wheeled about. He heard and understood. With a mighty burst of speed he shot across the ice, passing Parson, who was heading toward the yard of a factory where many men were employed.

Terry, without stopping for a word to Faith, leaped to his feet and shot after his chum.

Starting ten seconds after Dick did, Terry was just about ten seconds behind him at the air-hole.

Like a flash Dick was sitting on the ice, throwing off his skates.

"You going in?" asked Terry, calmly. "Or me?"

CHAPTER IX.

PLANNED BY A FIEND.

"I'm going in," Dick replied swiftly. "Terry, stick a stick, a pole, or something down through the air-hole, so that when I find Miss Kitty I'll know in which direction to bring her."

"A pole, is it?" uttered Terry, glancing swiftly around. "Nothing doing! There's none around. I'll keep me legs through the ice. Look for 'em when ye're comin' back."

Splash! Dick was through the air-hole, under the water, and looking frantically around.

Terry calmly went through the air-hole, clutching at the edge of the ice, while he let both his legs hang down.

Faith, skating faster than she had ever done before, came flying to the spot.

She came too close, in fact, to please her young admirer.

"Faith, darlin'," begged Terry Rourke, "keep back! We don't want more folks under the ice."

It was darker down there under the ice than Dick Halstead could have believed.

He saw something dark and shadowy and pulled for it with strong strokes.

As he moved it vanished. Only a shadow!

Groaning, Dick halted and looked around.

Next he perceived Terry's legs sticking down through the water and swam toward them.

From there he took a fresh start in another direction.

A dozen strong strokes, and he found something floating.

He went closer. It was Kitty, quite unconscious, and floating with her face upward, touching the ice.

With an inward groan, Dick gripped one hand tightly in her ulster.

Again he sighted Terry's hanging legs, and started toward them.

As he reached, he gave one of Terry's legs a shove, then hobbled up with the senseless girl on his left arm.

"Hurroo!" yelled Terry. "No; keep back, Faith, darlin'."

"Get out cautiously, so as not to break more ice," directed Dick, gaspingly, while he trod water to keep the double burden out.

Terry was soon out on the ice, lying on his stomach and reaching forward.

He seized Kitty by the collar, supporting her with her face above the water.

"Keep her so," directed Dick, briefly.

Then, at the opposite side of the air-hole, he worked himself carefully out.

Now, throwing himself on his stomach, he worked his way to Terry's side and took another grip in the girl's ulster collar.

Thus they got her out and on to sounder ice.

"Oh, that was splendid!" glowed Faith.

Terry, without looking, called back:

"Faith, darlin', do us th' gr-reatest favor. Pick up our skates for us, will ye?"

Miss Vane obeyed without question, while Dick and Terry got on to their feet, supporting Miss Lester between them.

"To the factory—that's the best place to get help!" directed Dick.

He and Terry bore the girl at a trot across the ice, Faith skating close to them.

Fifteen or twenty men, Parsons with them, now leaped from the factory yard to the ice.

They brought with them ladders, boards and ropes.

But they halted when they saw that other party coming toward them.

"Oh, Halstead! Of course he had to get in this and play the star part again—with my girl!" groaned Parsons, feeling sick inside.

"Some of you folks run back and telephone for a couple of doctors. And find the Lester carriage and send the driver for dry clothing," called Dick.

He and Terry carried the still unconscious girl into the engine-room. Some of the men brought a long box and coats and made up a couch swiftly, on which Kitty was laid.

Faith had already taken off Miss Lester's ulster.

Dick went promptly at work on such tricks of restoring the drowned as he had heard of, Terry helping.

"Here's a doctor!" shouted some one, and at that moment Kitty Lester opened her eyes, smiling at Young Wide Awake.

"Good work, lad," said the doctor, approvingly. "You've brought her out. There isn't much to do, except to get her into dry clothing and home."

Blankets being brought, the men and boys present stepped from the room, leaving Faith to undress her friend and roll her in the blankets.

Thus Kitty Lester was resting comfortably and feeling bright by the time that her father and mother arrived with dry clothing.

In the meantime one of the boys employed at the factory had been dispatched after dry clothing for Terry and Dick.

So our young friends were reclothed and comfortable again by the time that John Lester approached them.

"Boys," he cried huskily, "I don't know what to say, so I'm not going to say much now. I'll wait until later. But I shall never feel uneasy about my daughter's safety, Halstead, when you are with her."

Parsons heard, the words going through him like a knife-jab.

He hurried from the factory, which was as well for him, for when Miss Kitty sent for the boys she took Dick's hand and remarked:

"There was a coward and one of the other kind on hand, Captain Halstead."

Terry in the meantime was doing a lot of quiet talking to Miss Faith in one corner of the engine-room.

"Well, the carriage is on hand to take you home, child," said Kitty's father.

Clang! clang! The fire alarm was reeling off its call.

"Duty!" cried Dick, and no other word, as he sprang through the doorway. Terry was at his heels.

As the two boys raced up Main Street they saw good old Washington No. 1 turn the corner two blocks ahead of them and head up Main Street.

Hal Norton, who was in command, was not sparing the young firemen.

Dick and Terry were not able to reach the machines until they had been halted just around a corner.

The blaze was already a furious one.

It was on the ground floor of a doctor's home.

The doctor, with a bottle of ether in his hand, had gone too close to a flame.

There had been a flash, a quick explosion, and burning ether was scattered all over the place.

At first unconscious, the doctor, by the time that his senses came back to him, was just barely able to drag himself out of the blazing room.

A gallon bottle of alcohol, cracked by the heat, had taken fire, too, and here was a first-class blaze, fed by the hottest fuel.

The house was an old wooden structure.

"If the fire once gets much past the back room," uttered Dick, as he thrust open the street door and looked in, "there won't be anything left of this place."

"Shall I turn in another alarm and bring Torrent One here?" asked Hal.

"No; there's the hose coupled. Rush it in here, boys! Axemen and pikemen, follow! We've got to fight fire hand to hand, and never mind burns!"

Young Wide Awake himself darted out to get an axe.

While there he halted to urge those at the engine bars to pump harder.

The crowd surged all about the young firemen, for there were yet no police on hand to establish fire lines.

One young fellow, with raven-black hair and a small, black mustache, brushed close to our hero.

As he did so, this unknown made a swift move of hand and arm that is well-known among pickpockets.

But this stranger took nothing from Halstead's pocket. Instead, he dropped something in, then backed away.

"Come on, and get busy there, you axemen!" shouted Dick. "I'll head you into it. Never mind a few burns!"

Our hero had sprung at the head of his little squad.

First the hosemen played a drenching stream into the seething room.

"Now, axemen and pikemen, come in with me and scatter some of this blazing wood!" called Dick.

Into their work they sailed.

Crash; smash! rip!

Panels and blazing walls yielded quickly under those hard blows and shoves. Blazing embers littered the floor and were played upon.

Then those in the crowd outside heard a deafening explosion from the house!

CHAPTER X.

MASCOT TROT MAKES A FIND.

Ted, with a wrench on the hydrant, regulating the water pressure under Hal's orders, saw that black-haired stranger brush close to our hero.

For an instant Ted looked and was thoughtful.

Then came a sharp order from Lieutenant Norton, and Ted's mind was carried back wholly to his duties.

Trot, the mascot, which had slept lately at the fire house and had been fed by various members of the company, had kept in the background.

Yet that knowing dog was at the fire, as if he felt it his duty to be.

Moving in and out of the crowd, sniffing at people's legs in an inquiring way, Trot suddenly stopped short.

His spotted hair bristled, and a growl came from between his teeth as his nose detected the presence of disguised Rack Evans.

"Gr-r-r-r!" he uttered, so savagely that Rack jumped back several feet and bumped into somebody else.

In a jiffy Ted abandoned wrench and hydrant.

"Send somebody else to the hydrant," he demanded of Hal, and dashed up the steps into the house.

"Where's the captain?" he demanded, showing up at the door of the blazing back room.

"Here!" answered Young Wide Awake, from near one of the windows.

"Oh, Dick, I saw a fellow in the crowd thrust something into your pocket—I'm sure I did! And Trot's growling something awful at the fellow now."

"Which pocket?" demanded our hero, stepping back, with a lively recollection of the Lincoln affair in his mind.

"That one," nodded Ted, laying a hand on the pocket.

Young Wide Awake thrust his hand inside.

Then both he and Ted Lester changed color in a twinkling.

For one brief instant both young firemen glared at a stick of explosive in Captain Dick Halstead's hand.

"Dynamite!" gasped Young Wide Awake, in a voice that could barely be heard.

Then he tossed it out into the yard through an open window.

At the other window of the room Terry and three others had hoisted a burning lounge.

"Out wid it!" ordered Terry, and the lounge went heaving through the window.

Lounge and dynamite struck some feet apart, but from the burning article of furniture a shower of sparks went up and settled.

Some of them touched the dynamite.

Boom!

That was the explosion that the folks outside of the house heard.

"For hiven's sake!" gasped Terry, falling back, "what was it?"

"Dynamite," said Young Wide Awake, quietly, going through his other pockets, while Ted Lester quivered speechlessly.

"In thot lounge?" demanded Terry, while several of the fellows made a break to get out.

"Come back, you fellows, and get to work," rang the young captain's voice, sharply. "No, Terry, I threw that stick out. There isn't any more in my pockets. The danger's over, fellows!"

The explosion even of that unconfined stick had worked havoc to the ground in the yard.

It had scattered the lounge in many fragments and had shattered window glass.

Had it exploded in Halstead's pocket, the dynamite would either have killed him outright or wrecked his fine young body for life.

"Sail into your work lively now," he ordered. "I'll tell you about the thing later. Ted," he whispered, "dash outside and show that fellow to Hal. If the police are here yet, have the fellow nabbed."

By the time that Ted reached the street there was new excitement on out there.

Disguised Rack Evans, hearing the explosion, had started to walk briskly away.

Trot objected, with a growl.

That made Rack break into a run.

As one of his feet flew back, Trot buried his teeth in the trousers leg by the heel and held on.

That threw Evans.

He landed on his face, but rolled over in his effort to get up.

As he did so, Trot, quick as a flash, sprang at the fellow's throat.

Gr-r-r-r! Trot held on firmly, nor did Evans dare stir.

This lively scene drew most of the crowd away from the fire on the run.

"Somebody get this dog off!" yelled Rack Evans.

Chief Jason Sharp stepped over there nimbly.

As he reached the spot, Rack's little black mustache became loosened and lay crosswise over his mouth.

"My friend," observed Chief Sharp, grimly, "your mustache doesn't seem to be a good fit."

"Get that dog off of me!" squirmed Rack.

"I guess I can get the dog off, chief," broke in Ted, excitedly. "But I reckon you want nippers to put on this fellow. He put dynamite in Captain Halstead's pocket. That's what the dog is mad about."

"Dynamite!" gasped the chief of police.

"That's what caused the explosion you heard," announced Ted. "It didn't hurt anybody, though."

"The kid lies! I didn't do nothing of the sort!" yelled Rack. "Take this dog off!"

"Why, my friend, it seems to me that I know your voice," said Jason Sharp, queerly. "You've been painting your hair, but I reckon you're the same old Rack Evans. Rack, my boy, I'm mighty glad to see you again!"

"Take the dog off; he's eating a hole through me," appealed Rack.

"I guess I can get the dog off," uttered Ted Lester. "But I hadn't orter."

"With a little patting and coaxing, Ted managed to draw the growling, bristling Trot away.

The marks of Trot's teeth were visible on Rack's neck; that was all.

"Let me see your wrists," requested Chief Sharp, and click! snap! the handcuffs were on, and Rack was yanked to his feet, a very crestfallen prisoner.

Sharp turned the fellow over to one of his policemen to hold.

In the meantime, Young Wide Awake, by bringing his crew back to their work after the instant's very natural panic, had succeeded, between the use of axes, pikes and the stream in the house, in getting the blaze in the doctor's office under control.

But the crowd, which had found far more excitement than it had looked for, was at fever heat outside.

For Ted had told the whole of the story of the stick of dynamite, and now, with a crowd of several hundred indignant people, and only three policemen on hand, it looked very dangerous for the prisoner.

"Hustle him away to the lock-up," ordered Chief Sharp to his two policemen. "Friends, let the law take its course. You all know me, and I tell you that I am determined that, no matter what happens, you shall not take the prisoner away from my officers!"

That speech, which carried with it an understood threat of trouble, quieted the crowd until Rack's two conductors had disappeared with him.

But Dick, as he came out, had to make a little speech, in which he assured the crowd that, thanks to Ted's discovery and prompt action, no harm had been done by the dynamite.

"And our thanks are also due to this four-footed friend of Washington One," added Young Wide Awake, with a smile, as Trot came forward and thrust his cold nose into Halstead's hand.

CHAPTER XI.

AT BAY!

Supper over, Dick, left by himself for a moment, while his mother went upstairs, pulled out a note and looked it over, happiness shining in his eyes.

This note, which had come an hour ago, was the second received that day from Miss Kitty Lester.

"I am now quite all right again—thanks wholly to you and your brave friend," ran the note. "Papa has asked me to beg you to come up this evening. I would command, if I had that right. At all events, unless you do come—you and Mr. Terry Rourke—there will be two very indig-

nant young ladies who will demand explanations later, and who will not be satisfied with easy ones, either. In any case, our carriage will call for you."

This note had been delivered by the Lester driver.

Dick, after only a moment's thought, had sent back a note accepting the invitation, but begging that no carriage be sent, as he and Terry felt much more at home on their feet.

While Dick sat there, there came a knock at the door, and Terry bounded in.

"Ye're going?" he asked.

"That reminds me," laughed Young Wide Awake, "of your question as to whether a fellow would step into Heaven if he had the chance."

"Oi'm excited—that's what got hold av me," complained Terry, dropping into a chair.

"You've got brand-new clothes on, Terry!" accused Dick.

"Shure, Oi have, an' th' bist suit Oi iver owned. Shure, Oi persuaded me mother thot, av Oi was goin' out into society, I oughter be dressed in a manner becomin' to her son. So the mother shoved her hand down in the crockery jar where she hoides her savin's—and here Oi am."

"That makes me think of my best," smiled Dick. "They got pretty wet this afternoon, and they've been drying since. I think I'll find them ready to press now."

He rose and passed into the kitchen, followed by his friend.

Fred Parsons, with his easy life, would have sent the suit to a tailor. Dick had been brought up to do these things sturdily for himself. Dick was the one to go in under the ice; Parsons was not.

All in good time the pressing was finished, and Young Wide Awake vanished up the stairs to dress in his room.

He came down, looking almost dudishly neat. He certainly was at his best.

"Shure," uttered Terry, "Oi wish Oi had yure looks an' style along wid me likin' for talking to the gurruls."

"You'd better not repeat that speech to Miss Vane," laughed Dick. "Come on, old fellow."

For a wonder, Terry was very silent as they walked up Main Street.

He greeted his friends and acquaintances as he met them, but beyond that the Irish lad had mighty little to say.

It was only when the two friends reached the lonelier stretch of the road beyond Belmont that Rourke unburdened himself.

"Dick," he began, "Oi'm a wondhering."

"What about, Terry?"

"Will it lasht?"

"Will what lasht?"

"Our seein' the blessed gurruls?"

"Why, we can't stay there forever," laughed Dick. "We must take our leave decently early."

"Tain't thot, an' ye know it," retorted Terry, impatiently. "But this is th' sicond toime we're goin' to the house, an' to-day we had the young ladies out on the ice."

'Tis moighty often we're seein' thim, an' the young ladies don't seem to moind it, ayether. But what's troublin' me, is this just a passin' notion, or will they always be glad to see us? Is it politeness, or do they really enjoy seein' us?"

"There's only one way we could settle that," laughed Dick.

"How?"

"By asking them."

"Bedad, Oi belave Oi'll do it!"

"Terry, if you do, I'll thump your head off when we get away from there to-night!"

They were passing a deep field now.

Near the road this field was bordered by a row of great trees.

Unobserved by either of the boys, they had been slyly trailed from Belmont.

As soon as the one doing the trailing was able to guess where the two were going, he bounded off down a side road and ran until he was able to get close to the road again, and ahead of them.

Now this figure crouched behind one of the big trees.

"Did you ever look into Faith's eyes much?" Terry inquired.

"Meaning Miss Vane's?" asked Dick.

"Av coorse!"

"I've tried to two or three times," laughed Young Wide Awake, slyly, "but I've always found your eyes there ahead of me, Terry."

"Quit your foolin', now! What Oi was goin' t' say is thot, ordinarily, Miss Faith's eyes are as quiet and gintle as a dove's. But sometimes, wanst in a whoile, there's a flash——"

Just at that instant there was a flash, to a certainty.

It came from the side of a tree just ahead of them.

It was accompanied, too, by a sharp crack and the sing of a bullet that flew between Dick's head and Terry's.

For just an instant Dick and Terry both halted, staggered by surprise.

Then Young Wide Awake bounded forward, straight for the tree, nor did Rourke wait to be called.

The fellow who had done the shooting, finding the youngsters almost at arm's length, turned and bolted across the field.

"After him!" roared Dick.

The two young firemen sprinted hard.

"You might as well stop!" sang out Dick. "We're overtaking you, and we mean to catch you if we have to chase you all the way to China!"

The fugitive kept on running, though the distance between pursuers and their game was lessening.

"Blazes!" ejaculated Dick.

"What's wrong?" queried sprinting Terry.

"I know the fellow! I recognize him."

"Who is it, thin?"

"It's Sliney Gamp, Rack Evans's pal."

"The murtherin' scoundrel!"

"Sliney, you might as well stop and give up," roared Dick. "You can't hope to get away."

Looking over his shoulder, Gamp saw this statement to be true.

Then, quick as a flash, the tough halted.

He wheeled about, crouching low, holding his revolver straight out before him.

"Think you've got me, do you?" he leered. "Come and get me! I've got five bullets left for you!"

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

Dick halted swiftly.

So did Rourke.

"Spread out! Get away from me, Terry," ordered our hero.

This injunction Terry obeyed to the extent of making a wide berth around Gamp, on the jump, and getting behind the fellow.

Sliney snarled, wheeling so he could present a side to either one.

"Don't try to get any closer," he ordered in an ugly voice. "I've got a killing temper on to-night."

"Maybe we have, too," uttered Dick, very quietly.

"Get out of here, both of you, or I'll shoot one and then the other."

"If you try it, one of us will be jumping on you while you're blazing at the other," promised Dick. "Then you'd be captured, anyway, and your clock would be run down, Sliney."

Ere the words were out of our hero's mouth Terry leaped and bore Sliney down to the ground.

Bang!

The revolver was discharged, but its bullet went harmlessly into the frozen dirt.

Terry was pummeling the fellow for all he was worth.

Young Wide Awake, too, leaped forward, striking repeatedly.

Sliney, crying for mercy, let the revolver slip from his fingers.

Dick leaped to his feet, "breaking" the weapon and dropping the cartridges into his hand, thence to one of his pockets.

"Now stop and let him up," directed our hero. "Gamp, if you ain't as meek as a lamb and as obedient as a dog we'll hammer you quiet the next time we tackle you!"

Sliney got on his feet, a limp, miserable, spiritless object.

"Terry, walk beside him, holding on to his arm," directed our hero. "I'll keep behind him. Gamp, don't try to make any breaks, unless you want to be hammered into a cripple! Our patience is out with your kind of folks."

They marched Sliney back to the nearest house that had a telephone.

From there they telephoned for Chief Sharp, and waited until that official came out in a wagon.

Sliney was thereupon promptly handcuffed and tied down to the seat.

"You boys going to crowd in and go back with me?" inquired Jason Sharp.

"Not unless me have to, chief," responded Young Wide Awake. "We—we've got an appointment for this evening."

"A ver-ry impor-tant wan," chimed in Terry Rourke.

"Oh, you needn't come, then," laughed Jason Sharp, chuckling quietly, as if he guessed in what direction the appointment lay.

As soon as Sharp had driven away, Rourke begged anxiously:

"Look me over, Dick—look me well over. For the love av hiven, tell me, did Oi get a speck av dir-rt annywhere in thot scrimmage?"

The two young firemen fell to brushing each other off and making their toilets in the street as well as they could.

Then they turned their faces resolutely westward again.

A servant admitted them at the Lester door, and was taking their hats and coats when Kitty and Faith came into the hallway, looking prettier than ever.

"We feared you had forgotten," cried Kitty.

"Or backed out," added Faith.

"We had a bit of business to attend to on the way," replied Dick, with rather a grim smile. "Perhaps we'll tell you about it later. When we do, you may find it in your hearts to forgive us."

The girls led them into a drawing-room, where five older people were assembled.

Four of them were the Lesters and the Vanes, but the fifth, a stoop-shouldered, elderly man, was presented as Mr. Putney.

"Now, will you young ladies leave us for a moment?" asked John Lester, with a smile in his eyes.

Quite obediently Kitty and Faith turned and filed out, closing the door after them.

"Now, then," began Mr. Lester, "I told you to-day, Halstead, that I couldn't think, then, what to say by way of thanks."

"I hope you're not going to try now, sir," interjected Young Wide Awake. "We'd much rather let such a simple thing be forgotten."

"Thot we would," Terry agreed solemnly.

"But I can't let it be forgotten," cried Mr. Lester. "Now, hear me through. After to-day's exploit I recognize, more and more, the great debt I'm under to you."

"Mr. Putney here, who is the father of Clarence, feels—and I agree with him—that he owes you a great deal of repayment on account of the injury that young man did to you."

"So we've both determined, Halstead, to do our plain duty. That duty lies to Rourke as well as to yourself. Fortunately, we both have the means to do what is right."

Young Wide Awake glanced quickly at his friend's face. Then, our hero spoke.

"Mr. Lester and Mr. Putney, we both think we realize your kindness and generosity."

"It's nothing of the sort," cried Mr. Lester, warmly.

"We thank you both," Young Wide Awake went on, "but we don't feel that you owe us any debt of any kind."

"You two have your way to make in the world."

"We have, Mr. Lester, and I believe we'll both get a good deal further if we travel on our own efforts, with no one to boost us. You will never know how grateful we both are to you at this minute, Mr. Lester and Mr. Putney, but we both decline, with our greatest thanks, your wonderfully kind offer."

"Well, for independence, you boys get me," murmured John Lester, sinking into a chair. "But can't we leave it this way, young gentlemen—that we'll drop the subject now and take it up at some other time?"

"It'll hurt the feelings of two of your friends," retorted Halstead, smiling, "if you ever try to take the matter up again."

"Give it up, John. You can do nothing with them," broke in Mr. Vane. "On the whole, I think I'm pleased with the boys for the independent stand that they've taken."

Shaking his head and sighing, John Lester rose and went to call the girls back.

Then followed a general conversation, in the course of which Dick and Terry gave a brief account of their meeting with Sliney Gamp, and of the latter's efforts to avenge the taking of Rack Evans.

"I am afraid you young people are going to find it dull if we old folks keep you here much longer," smiled Mr. Lester, at last. "Kitty, suppose you ask your friends if they would like to go into the music-room?"

To that room the young folks promptly adjourned.

Faith, after a few minutes, drifted to the piano to play, while Terry, who had a quick eye and ear for music, stood beside her to turn over the pages.

Kitty sank back upon a divan, Dick sitting on a chair beside her.

"Are you comfortable, Mr. Halstead?" asked Miss Lester, looking up with a smile.

"Comfortable?" echoed Dick, in a low voice. "I was just thinking that I am a thousand times more than that."

"But you don't look comfortable on that straight, stiff-backed chair. There's room here, if you would prefer it."

She moved over on the divan, tucking her skirts beside her to make more room.

What could Halstead do, then?

Just what he did do!

"I have heard of your talk with my father," Kitty murmured in a low voice.

"Our talk to-night, you mean?" Dick asked, flushing uncomfortably.

"Yes."

There was silence then until our hero murmured:

"It was very kind and generous of him and Mr. Putney."

"It wasn't intended to be," Kitty replied gently. "At least, not that alone. It was meant as an offer of simple justice."

"You weren't displeased at our reply, were you?" he asked softly.

"Displeased?" replied the girl, looking down. "No. I was proud of you!"

"When you say that, Miss Kitty, I wouldn't swap places with any king or financier on earth!"

"Don't laugh at me," she pleaded. "I meant it."

"I'm not laughing at you, and I meant it, too," Halstead assured her.

He glanced over at Terry, whose head was very close to Faith's as the lad bent forward to read the words of a new song.

"It seems nice for us to be here," Kitty observed.

"Nice?" echoed Dick, with a simplicity that was better than flattery. "It's heaven!"

Miss Kitty flushed a little now, but she replied quickly: "I mean, when you're here, with the light and music and comfort, you're safe. You've been in so many awful dangers that I shudder when I hear a fire alarm ring."

"Do you?"

Then there was more silence.

It came time to go at last, and the boys reluctantly realized it.

"After this," invited Miss Lester, frankly, "you two young men won't make your calls mere, occasional duty calls, will you?"

"After this?"

Those two words rang in both of the boys' minds as they made their way rather silently homeward.

Sliney Gamp and Rack Evans both got their just deserts behind the bars.

As Clarence Putney, who was out West working as a day-laborer in one of his father's mines, naturally did not claim the money that Dick held, Washington One had its new banner, while Mr. Bill Stikes had the time of his life.

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